



After the End of the World: Poetics, Time and Black Experimental Writing

by Anthony Reed

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AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD: POETICS, TIME, AND BLACK
EXPERIMENTAL WRITING

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AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD: POETICS, TIME, AND BLACK
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"After the End of the World" is a study of the poetics of experimental writing, focusing on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Nathaniel Mackey, Suzan-Lori Parks and Kamau Brathwaite. By thinking form as a locus of political and conceptual contestation and transformation, I seek methods for conceiving politics in literature apart from its references or the identities of authors and characters. Writing in different genres, and with different political investments, each of these authors offers resources for re-imagining community as a project, for thinking the constitution of the self and political subject, and for conceiving politics and literary studies globally.

Using a broad conception of literary experimentation as writing that departs from conventional forms and conventional thinking, I emphasize time of reading, among other times. Arguing that conceptions of time tend to be at the heart of political concerns throughout the sites of the African diaspora, this project challenges those notions of black writing that rest on the binary of oppression/resistance.

I begin with an analysis of Du Bois' writing, especially his notions of double-consciousness and the veil, which I argue are related to writing and self-narration and thus to the problem of political and aesthetic representation. Parks' work similarly makes representation—especially historical representation—into a thematic question through which she problematizes the notion of a unitary "black experience."

Specifically concerned with poetry, Kamau Brathwaite and Nathaniel Mackey specifically confront and contravene the legacy of the lyric voice in both the presentation and topics of their work. Brathwaite invents a shifting system of fonts, margins and a capacious first-person singular/plural to articulate a time and a "we" of the Caribbean and the diaspora. Mackey's work uses music, repetition and pronoun shifts to de-emphasize the traditional lyric "I" in favor of a poetics concerned with the limits of the here and now. Considering the ways these authors elaborate considerations that do not immediately map onto their presumed preoccupations, this project generates a means for conceiving the relationship between form and politics. It starts from the materiality of language and literature and then proceeds to politics and theory.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Anthony Reed was born in the metro Detroit area 24 June 1978. He graduated from Romulus High School in 1996. In 2000, he received his B.A. with distinction from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, and received an M.F.A in creative writing from the same institution in 2002. He entered Cornell University in 2005, where he concentrated on poetry and poetics in the African diaspora, film and media studies, and Marxist theories of culture. He completed his dissertation research at Cornell University with the generous support of a graduate student fellowship at the Society for the Humanities funded by the Mellon Foundation in the 2009-2010 academic year, and received the Ph. D. in 2010.

For my mother

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This dissertation has no precise origin. It began, and began again, over the course of several conversations and interactions, in classrooms and outside. I cannot properly acknowledge all the hands that have helped its progress. It most took shape when Grant Farred, brushed aside my prospectus during a meeting and asked me simply to talk through the project in positive terms, without pausing to explain at every step within which conversations I saw myself intervening. He has been a consummate scholar, professional, and intellectual. I have learned much from his example, and his insistence on thinking in terms of an overarching intellectual project beyond the dissertation. Throughout the writing, he continued to challenge, push, and provoke me, always encouraging me to find my own voice, to articulate my concerns and arguments clearly and concisely. More than that, his responses have been generous, prompt, detailed and encouraging. I record here my gratitude for his advising, on this project and beyond. When I most needed support, he believed in this dissertation and my intellectual project; for that, I will be forever grateful.

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Barry Maxwell, at a very early stage, shared his love of poetry with me, and imparted to me a real appreciation for the embarrassing question, that question that shows the limits of a way of thinking or a line of argument. I appreciate his manner

even when the embarrassing question is directed at me. More than that, he continually encourages me to pay close attention to the specifics of the work I was analyzing, whether poetry or music. He has a keen eye for the odd detail, and the questions that need to be asked. He taught me to take the work seriously without taking myself too seriously, and like Grant and Amy, encouraged me to find ways to express complicated ideas with clarity.

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My brother, Ed Reed, has never failed to offer love, support, and frank advice has sustained me. These have sustained me as I navigated the various pleasures and frustrations both of and beyond graduate school. I thank Grandma Tina for always insisting that, whosever path I should cross, I should never lower my eyes, and never forget who I am, or where I come from. I thank my great-grandmother for so many things, especially for teaching me always to mean what I say, and say what I mean.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH	iii
DEDICATION PAGE	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS	viii
LIST OF FIGURES	x
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: VOICE CAST OUT: BEAUTY, VOICE AND THE TEMPORALITY OF DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS	
Voice and Writing	27
Promissory Note: An Account of the Self	38
Ellipsis: W.E.B. Du Bois' Sound of Love	45
Propaganda and the Im-Parting of History	63
Coda: Voicing Music	72
CHAPTER 2: EXPLODING DIMENSIONS OF SONG: FUGITIVE ARTICULACY AND MU-TOPIA	
Mu: "The Root of Whatever Song"	81
"On the edge of an 'it' otherwise / out of reach"	91
Phantom Objectivity and Objective Hauntings	101
Time Now Had a Hole in It	117
Orpheus Calling	125
CHAPTER 3: THE THEN THAT WILL BE: THE WORK OF DEAD TIME AND THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE	
Listening to Ghosts	137
The Void and the Great Hole of History	142
Private Language and Chaotic Textuality in <i>Imperceptible Mutabilities</i>	147

<i>in the Third Kingdom</i>	
"Once there was uh me": Laughter, Errantry, Betweenness	156
<i>Venus</i> and the Affirmation of the End	170
CHAPTER 4: WORDS TO REFASHION FUTURES: ICONICITY, FRAGMENTATION AND THE PLURAL INSTANT	
Imaging Enjambments: The Ground of the Letter	195
Into the Image of Sycorax	200
From Curse to Cursor	204
The Word that is Our Threshold to the World	211
Tryin to Ghost Words to Holla This Tale	223
So Hopefully New Each Time-Beginning Poem	238

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1, detail of "Letter Sycorax"	Pg. 203
Figure 2, detail of "X/Self xth letter / from the thirteenth colonies"	Pg. 203
Figure 3, detail of <i>Shar: Hurricane Poem</i>	Pg. 210
Figure 4, detail of <i>Shar: Hurricane Poem</i>	Pg. 210
Figure 5, detail of <i>Shar: Hurricane Poem</i>	Pg. 210
Figure 6, detail of <i>Shar: Hurricane Poem</i>	Pg. 211
Figure 7, detail of "Pixie"	Pg. 224
Figure 8, detail of "Pixie"	Pg. 225
Figure 9, detail of "Pixie"	Pg. 226
Figure 10, detail of "Heartbreak Hotel"	Pg. 227
Figure 11, detail of "DreamHaiti"	Pg. 228
Figure 12, detail of "DreamHaiti"	Pg. 228
Figure 13, detail of "DreamHaiti"	Pg. 229
Figure 14, detail of "Dream Haiti"	Pg. 232
Figures 15-18, details of "Dream Haiti"	Pp. 232-233
Figure 19, detail of <i>Ark</i>	Pg. 240

INTRODUCTION

THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME

The Instance of Politics

This dissertation proposes a reconceptualization of the place of politics within the literary text. My effort here concerns neither, on the one hand, analyses of the system through which a body of texts comes to be considered literature (or, as part of the same system, canonical) nor, on the other hand, those readings that consider the literary text itself to be a representation or symptom of underlying social contradictions. Instead, starting from poetics—the conventions, devices and means through which a literary text uses language to create its effects—I argue that the literary text always exceeds the norms or conventions through which we understand the literary. Pushing against those frameworks that are its conditions of intelligibility, every literary text risks becoming unrecognizable, risks that moment where a reader may encounter an instance of language and justifiably ask, "what is the author trying to say?" For hermeneutical criticism, such moments could, in a relatively straightforward way, either grant such confusion its own signifying function, or simply dismiss such moments as anomalous and therefore irrelevant to the "overall" meaning of the work "as a whole." Especially for political readings, where the horizon of the political is shaped either by the conflicts the text is supposed to represent or "express," the "whole" itself is not a function of the individual volume or author's oeuvre, but the ensemble of social forces that mark (and are marked by) the text. Indeed, the nominal urgency of such projects would demand such swiftness, but in the name of an analysis of literature the question of the literary, and of reading, is forgotten.

In the case of black writing—literature from racialized authors from sites within the African diaspora—racial difference becomes an analytic (rather than descriptive) category. The black author, it is presumed, represents her experience,

challenges the norms and structures of power through which she is constitutively (mis)recognized, and proposes a more authentic or just schema of representation. The literature is thus taken to have the task of articulating an identity or responding to a particular socio-political configuration; schematically, it reacts against imposed (inauthentic) otherness rather than innate (authentic) otherness. The ambivalence of these modes of otherness, whose primary difference rests in whether is subject or object of the performative othering, perhaps becomes clear. This criticism is broadly dialectical. At a given instant, and the givenness of that instant is excluded from analysis, the two discourses of otherness are reversible: each presumes the other.

To valorize work for its celebration of otherness to the extent that it others discourses of otherness is to say that this work is something other than some usually unnamed "mainstream" literature or ideology, which must nonetheless be maintained in its overcoming. Stated directly, criticism that starts from the instance of difference tends to reify the difference it wants to analyze. Racial or other difference moves from being "external" to the text as historical fact, to "internal" as an historically necessary theme, then outside the text again as that which the text was "really about," re-inscribing the schema social othering it presumably set out to oppose: these texts are simply *different* from other texts. What begins as a critique or worry over presumptions of literature as the transmitter of "neutral" social values, where "neutrality" means difference is annulled in the name of articulating a transcendent Same, the Other becomes itself merely a counter-transcendent Same oriented against the first instance of Sameness. To valorize one form of otherness as a challenge to another form of otherness is to uphold an essential sameness of the two discourses subtended by their mutual self-identity, which necessarily assumes and relies on the discursive situation it tries to undo. Difference—racial difference—becomes, to borrow Althusser's phrase, "determinant in the last instance," at once limit and

transcendent horizon. In the instance of criticism, this means that the specific techniques through which the literary text mobilizes and distributes differences of all kinds are not discussed or are treated as more or less incidental. Narrative anachrony, for example, becomes the sign of a trauma or of resistance to the narrative linearity (and, by extension, presumed historical linearity or narratives of progress) through which peoples are distributed as more or less "modern." Simultaneously, neither the relation of that difference to the literary text nor a thoroughgoing account of the emergence of that difference from one epoch to another is possible. The structuralist distinction between diachrony and synchrony is effectively suspended in favor of a notion like "the changing same," to borrow a term from Amiri Baraka's famous essay.

My point here is not that such readings are merely erroneous, or unjustifiable. Rather, this set of presumptions shifts concern from politics—i.e., political strategies aimed at changing a given situation—to the political—i.e., the conditions under which politics might be imagined or carried out. In Gramsci's terms, there is only war of position, no war of maneuver. As a result, especially salient in the case of discussion of black literature but by no means limited to it, almost any engagement with the political by a black person becomes, automatically, an instance of politics. Often this is rooted in a particular notion of tradition that discursively relates *a certain past* to *the future* by making the former term a condition or *nomos* for the latter. A recent example of this tendency is Fred Moten's ambitious, celebrated work, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Moten implicitly revises and extends Houston Baker's earlier notion of a "blues matrix"—where a "matrix is a womb, a network, ... a mat or plate for reproducing print of phonograph records ... a point of ceaseless input and output, a web of intersecting, crisscrossing impulses always in productive transit" and the blues are the "enabling *script* in which Afro-American

cultural discourse in inscribed."¹ In its place, Moten puts forward what he variously terms "black phonic materiality," "black phonic substance," or occasionally "the music," and thus displaces Baker's insistent inscription. Engaging Marx's articulation of commodity fetishism *Capital, Volume One* in light of slavery where, for Moten, slaves simply *are* commodities, he argues, "the commodity discovers herself, comes to know herself, only as a function of having been exchanged, having been embedded in a mode of sociality that is shaped by exchange."² As with Baker's work, a certain Hegel is never far from the scene. The very structure of subjectivity—knowing oneself—depends upon the slave's self-understanding as slave, which means, as in Baker's argument, as *a* commodity, and we should emphasize the singular indefinite article. Moten's use of the feminine pronoun anticipates subsequent elaboration of Baker's matrix in the direction of the *maternity* at the heart of "matter." Citing the instance of Aunt Hester's non- or not-yet-linguistic cry in Fredrick Douglass' 1845 Narrative, Moten goes on to argue for what he calls a "scene of objection"—at once her literal objectification and, critically, her objection at having been made an object. To the extent that her self-denying or self-effacing awareness of herself as an object is the condition of her agency, one cannot yet speak of *her* agency. The cry, as the event of resistance, is axiomatically political, but agency belongs to the cry itself, which represents itself to itself as a movement in and for itself. The black phonic substance's irruption can be understood as the instance or insistence of a past moment—both in and prior to time—in the present as an impulse toward human freedom. It is not subject to the decision of any subject, but summons itself as the always prior instance of resistance before power. In this way, it necessarily precludes any moment that does

¹ Houston Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp.3-4. Emphasis in original.

² Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 9.

not belong to it, any moment or interval that would hesitate between meaning and non-meaning: it is the full presence of resistance, a moment of negativity in a greater dialectic toward human emancipation.³

This conclusion is the result of a particular synchronic understanding of historical experience (or, in Baker's terms, "interpretations of the experiencing of experience").⁴ Methodologically, this view of an ontological resistance rooted in a particular history (and a particular history of representation) of slavery leaves us unable to account for differences—between people classified as "black" within the U.S. irrespective of their place of origin, or between the moments of slavery and the present. Simultaneously, it becomes difficult analytically to distinguish between systems of power and the exercise of force. This impasse is in part the result of an ambiguity within the institution of slavery that declaring the slave simply *to be* a commodity obscures. The slave is not *one*, is not a singular entity, but rather is the *outcome* of a contradictory set of processes whereby a person (which, from the standpoint of legal histories is at best a loaded term) comes *at certain times* and *under certain conditions* to be treated *as* a commodity – at once an instance of fixed and variable capital. Further, To ask about the slave's resistance is at once to naturalize the category of the person or the human as subject of rights, and to bypass the question of resistance's genesis, the conditions of the emergence of any resistance, objection, of any saying, and the different and differential conditions of legibility (or audibility) of any cry. Returning to the considerations of difference with which I began, the vacillation between fixed and variable capital, for example, suggests that *the* "black

³ One might see here, too, an affinity with Fredric Jameson's arguments for the artwork as an attempt to resolve real contradictions by symbolic means, considered here along the axes of race rather than the means, mode and relations of production, with a similar impulse to privilege the synchronic as a means to think the totality. Unlike Jameson, however, it is not clear that Moten has any interest in the final dialectic moment of finally resolving conflicts in something like the advent of the socialist state, or that he sees any difference of intensity or magnitude between one kind of utopian imagining and another.

⁴ *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, p. 7.

experience” during slavery is not *one*. So, too, for experiences of Africans in the United States and elsewhere throughout the diaspora are multiple, and cannot be reduced to a single, simple origin, or a simple stance of negativity or resistance to overlapping systems of power.

This has obvious consequences for the ways we think about literature, and the overlapping traditions within *and* against which black authors work. In privileging the analysis of poetics over hermeneutic interpretation, this dissertation seeks instances of politics within literary texts by lingering over such conceptual voids and the ways literature problematizes the categories through which it is most commonly considered, and the categories that mark its emergence. Methodologically, I insist on time as the thinking of change, and as the synthesis of discrete moments within the literary text. This also means that I understand the literary text itself to be a contingent unity that always threatens to undo itself, in the case of the authors considered here, through intertextual citation, seriality or revision. In my view, it is not literature "itself" that becomes co-opted, but ways of reading, especially those that seek to close or predetermine the direction of the literary text. Anticipating my consideration of W. E. B. Du Bois in the first chapter, one mechanism through which literature gets recruited for different schemes of power or ideology is *impatient* reading that avoids or reduces the insistent materiality of literature, both the words on the page and their formal presentation, mark an instance of ideological closure. For that reason, I do not endeavor to find the most lucid or accurate *interpretation* of literary texts, but to analyze the ways literature's stubborn materiality complicates interpretation.

That complication is the place of politics. Insisting on the excessive nature of literature, and of language, my analyses resist the closure that allows one to say a work is "really about" an already thematized otherness, or to reduce the play of texts in order to harness writing's power toward particular political ends that precede the

work. Poetics starts from the text and considers its play of difference and its movements, its moments of self-undoing, the ways in which it challenges the categories through which we read it. My term for this productive self-undoing is “fugitive articulacy,” which recalls the lure of a certain notion of black history and black history, and the “law” of reading whereby one is tempted to order the cultural object’s elements *in a particular way* to define the instance of politics.

How to Go On: After the End

Though I privilege literature in these pages, this attention to poetics need not be limited to the literary text. Let me briefly consider Sun Ra’s “After the End of the World” (the version on the soundtrack for the film *Space is the Place*) from which I take my title. At the beginning of the song, Sun Ra’s organ sounds a drone; June Tyson’s tart contralto metrically recites the lyric: “after the end of the world. / Don’t you know that yet?” Both lines end on an accented syllable, the first being, from the point of view of prosody, trisyllabic (dactylic), (**A**fter the **e**nd of the **w**orld), the latter disyllabic (trochaic) (**D**on’t you **k**now that **y**et?). Abstracting rhythm from the semantic content, the two trisyllables followed by two disyllables might recall a drummer’s marching cadence, insofar as the latter two phrases rhythmically settle the phrase into tight regularity. As the phrase repeats, a staggered male chorus joins, now declaring “*It’s* after the end of the world”: the initial phrase “began” after its own beginning, the rhythm effectively unchanged by its “it’s,” which as an anacrusis or anticipatory syllable is a syllable out of time. The copula—*to be*, the conjunction between subject and predicate—is absent, multiplying the strange ontology of the semantic phrase: what “is” or can be *after* the end of the world?” More radically, the very question of being, as the antecedent of the conventional “it” of “it is,” remains outside of the phrase: “it,” “there” and “when” all seem beside the point. These

lines—especially considered in conjunction with the organ's harmonically unresolved chord and non-punctuated duration (e.g., there is not a break to mark tempo)—yields a congeries of overlapping times and rhythms, a call to thinking rooted in the performance of the words, the performance that the words are. One is lead to the thinking of time, the staging or *mise-en-scène* of time. This time, if it is one, after the end of the world—perhaps the "other side of time" Sun Ra occasionally referred to—asserts itself in the poetics, which suspends time. What time is this? What Being is approached or voided?

The voices repeat, chant-like and slightly staggered to break the rhythm's regimentation. The male voices stay within a narrow dynamic and harmonic range, while Tyson ranges from *piano* to *fortissimo*, inflecting the phrase differently with each pass, as if she were an actor rehearsing her lines. The voices fade, but Sun Ra's minor-key drone continues, and a trumpet improvisation fades in, processed with heavy reverb (either added before the performance or after in post-production), its sound lagging behind as if searching for the "now" or "then" of June Tyson's "yet." The reverberations, the transition and overlap between sections of the song and the lines themselves suggest the conjunction of disparate times.⁵ A "post" reverberates in the present in which one realizes his or her fate too late ("don't you know that yet?"), and an impossible time that cannot move forward ("it's after the end of the world") but nonetheless will have progressed.

The accent of the phrase falls most on the preposition *after* and the adverb *yet*, which point in opposite temporal directions—respectively to the event that has just passed and to an event to come, making the present—any now—an open question. From another perspective, however, both point in the same direction, toward the

⁵ It is beyond the scope of my argument here, but it will be necessary to think the status of this performance in light of the disparate modes of writing and performance implied by the script, the performance and the reading and writing of the recording apparatus itself.

future, insofar as one is told of the event because there is some present or future obligation. *It's already after the end of the world, and you still haven't....* From this second perspective, the present is only important as a critical juncture of time, and the question becomes what will become of us, whichever us receives this message or warning? Will the event of the end of the world—the annihilation of any possible archive or inscription—repeat? And precisely which world has ended, if some "we" still receives messages and thinks in the wake of its finish? Accent the definite pronoun, however—"after the end of *the* world"—and the situation is not an absolute end, but a catastrophe, an abrupt, discontinuous, radically unexpected turn that disjoins what was imagined to be the unidirectional flow of time. The catastrophe is generative—the end marks a beginning, a new situation wherein one does not know how to continue (or begin), where, invoking Wittgenstein to underscore the communal nature of any uses of language, one does not know his or her way around. It is a call for thinking anew, for thinking transcending its limits, even as the regular rhythmic structure the warning falls into implicates the difficulty of such a task.

Privileging style and literature's active assemblage of elements, both its staging and having an estranging encounter with language, I do not wish to purify reading of the "merely" personal, the "merely" contingent. Instead, I want to raise the question of the relationship between that time and the time of reading, between a work and its time, or of that now to this one. Above all, I wish to call into question the idea of a "neutral" experience of reading, an idealized set of encounters that one "must have had" with the text, reducing reading and the reader, a singular placeholder, to a site of simple machine-like computations of graphemes and phonemes. In this sense, my focus on poetics is inherently temporal, concerned with the mechanisms through which that "really about" is produced. If literature, taken as material practice, pushes against its own limits, it also pushes against any such idealization of "the" reader.

Returning to the example of song already considered and recurrent throughout these pages, rather than making it *the* privileged figure of resistance or protest, I consider music alternately as reference, theme and compositional principle, arguing for music's theatrical and above all *indexical* density as one element of experimental writing to be considered in the context of other effects of literature. In other words, music can function as a spur to creativity or counterpoint, a method—like allusion, citationality, or a privileging of the graphic aspect of writing—for interrupting the presumed flow of mimesis or representation. Through this reorientation, I attend to the graphic in the most general sense, the mark that is not necessarily linked to the voice, while always keeping in mind the necessity of this sound and the interpretation of the sound to pass through signification, and thus the possibility of change.

This possibility marks the definition of *experimental* in this dissertation: from Du Bois to Brathwaite, the emphasis is not on achieving particular goals rooted in transhistorical interests, or producing measurable results to be verified or evaluated based on those goals in the face of an overarching "method" or tradition. The experimental, which may only be a moment in an otherwise conventional mode of writing or representation, marks an moment in the text where one no longer knows one's way about, where the norms of understanding or intelligibility falter and one faces the demand to think. In this sense, literature is a modality of thinking whose medium is language itself, as concepts are the media of philosophy.

Experimental writing, often critical of received or sedimented ideas—the givenness of the world or language as given—tends toward complicated assemblages that do not easily resolve. The literatures selected for this study tend especially to manipulate or layer times drawing attention to grammar and conventions, creating a confusion of temporal registers, and producing a uniquely rich body of work for thinking the concept of time, and of history as a method for managing time. Because

of its ability to interrogate space and time simultaneously this literature can productively interrogate, for example, the linkage of time and space performed discursively by the use of the term "African diaspora." The manipulation of time through poesis has a peculiar political valence, especially from the point of view of community or audience, which recur throughout the literature as figures of temporalized space as much as spatialized time. In both instances, however, neither community nor audience is a simple gathering of present beings sharing the same time as the performance, even where "live" performance is specifically invoked.

In defining experimentation as broadly as I have, I emphasize the necessity, again following Du Bois, of "patient reading" as the means through which the work of criticism can renew itself. I endeavor to catch the positive capacities of literature, or, if you will, the *literariness* of literature, through which it may attempt to affect, rather than reflect, change in the world. The solution is not a "return" to literature as somehow "purified" of social or political concerns. To attend to literariness does not require that one ignore all other concerns, but rather that one think those concerns from the point of view of the literary, rather than vice-versa, allowing those concerns to be transformed by their encounter with the literary as productive, not merely expressive. Proceeding from the question of poesis—how literature works and what it makes, including the specific problems it articulates and elaborates which may deviate from concrete states of affairs or historical concerns—this dissertation operates on the basis of a supple tradition, a category within which the links between the authors are not pre-determined by history or social identity, a category constantly undone and reformed on the basis of patient reading. One asks, in other words about style: the use of language beyond what it "says" or signifies, but toward what thinking it makes possible, toward an intensive or non-actualized *potential* in language and

literary form. This orientation serves as a check on those pieties of resistance, that rush to closure and interpretation that effectively re-encloses its object.

The Instance of the Instant

In the years following *Space is the Place* critics and theorists have increasingly argued for the centrality of temporality to the study of literature, from the slogan "always historicize" and the work of literary "recovery" to more recent attention to spectrality and haunting in post-colonial and African-American literary and cultural studies. Time is of special importance to the study of the African diaspora, insofar as the figure of diaspora denotes exilic space, a phantasmatic site of origin, a home "foreclosed" except to memory or narrative, and a deferred homecoming, the sign of a possible future. The role of consciousness or self-fashioning is only ever partially in one's hand, as one must always contend with competing notions of time, supported by different forms of life.

Diaspora as link of identity and future reconciliation names a utopian longing to the extent that it implies an ideal state of community where that which prohibits this ideal community has been removed. It figures an ideal unity, immanent to present relations between people, but not actualized in them, as becomes apparent, for example, when the son of an African father and American mother cannot be accepted as African American, *tout court*. It is impossible in the precise sense that the coming into being of the unity towards which "diaspora" gestures is impossible in the world as it is known, or thought. Though literature can invoke and pre-script such futural unity, this project is more interested in those moments that have nothing to do with an explicit or thematic desire to say, which I figure here under the notion of fugitive or phantom articulacy. In my consideration of Nathaniel Mackey, I argue for literature's re-writing of this utopian longing as a utopian longing, the pursuit of a home that has

never been, and that can never be *as such*, rooted in the process of writing as a system of differences. The experimental moment, where the inadequacy of literary conventions and their limiting presuppositions, is one where the word must be, so to speak, rubbed against itself, cracked and pushed to say more than it wants to say, or to say the impossibility of saying more. It is the moment where simply invoking some future harmony is either pat, disingenuous, or made beside the point.

Diaspora proves to be one catachrestic name for that virtuality that can break through any concrete state of affairs, the name for a *potential* rather than *possible* world, the difference being that the latter is based on a calculation performed within existing empirical socio-historical conditions, whereas the former is more radically immanent, subject to neither calculation nor perspective. Thinking diaspora as virtual, it no longer features as the destiny of an epoch or the fulfillment of divine promise, but a project and a process, both of dispersal and re-articulation. Thought in these terms, the concept of diaspora is not relevant only to those who self-identify as belonging to it, but is immanent to every articulation of modernity, or of nation, much in the sense that Du Bois speaks of the Negro's "message for the world."

Temporality proves politically central in another sense, insofar as both the designation "modern" and the nation itself, broadly conceived, require the formation of an administrative class that exercises control to maintain social relations and determine the proper use of time, and that authorizes itself to *name* a time, or epoch (e.g., modernity). This temporality, as has been widely discussed by theorists, rests on narratives subtended by the notion of a single, transhistorical subject (e.g., "man," the One) on one hand, and the developmental unfolding from a single, uncontaminated origin, on the other, thus instituting a chronology of the human species and along which peoples are distributed as relatively modern or backwards. By contrast, the thought of diaspora is necessarily rhizomatic, which means not simply opposed to the

totalitarian, "arboreal" root, but also positively invested in multiplicity, in refusing to dissolve disparate entities into one identity or contra-modernity. Alongside the fixity of identities and their histories one finds an extension of identities through their relation, and their ultimate dissolution in the speculative openness to the coming future, beyond the narrow present, underwritten by habit and memory.

Diasporas, often resulting from the involuntary movements of people due to forcible expulsion or other existential threats, are not exclusively matters of resistance or transnational solidarity. Diasporas imply a not only a material nomadism but a conceptual one, and as such work in at least two ways. The nomad, the person who does not belong to a space always figures a law from elsewhere that threatens the law or *nomos* of the settled land. The diasporic subject is from both here and there, center and margin, marking a point of non-closure that poses unique problems in contemporary capitalist modernity. This is as much to say that though politics may proceed from identity in a certain sense, political struggles are the means through which identities are broken down and re-formed.

Nonetheless, most historical narratives of the African diaspora are structured around temporal concerns: the struggle over labor time during and immediately following slavery; bureaucracy's slowness; the fragmented national time of civil war and forced relocations, "modernization," the non-synchronous times separating the peasantry from the urban proletariat, claims by the metropole that the colonies are not "politically mature" and so on. In an influential essay,⁶ Michael Hanchard posits three essential features that transect both space and time within the diaspora: "the distinctive role of history in Afro-Modernity," "inequalities visited on African and African-descended populations [which] have often been understood temporally, as impositions

⁶ "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora" in *Alternative Modernities* ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University press, 2001), pp. 272-298. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "Afro-Modernity."

of *human time*" and a "temporal understanding of racial and colonial orders [that] in turn [have] affected ideas about freedom, progress, and racial solidarity," especially in the historical "epochs of slavery, freedom, and emancipation, and in the post-World War II period of civil rights, black nationalist and anticolonial movements" ("Afro-Modernity" 277, emphasis added). He goes on to elaborate a notion a notion of "racial time," which involves the "appropriation" of time" which involves waiting, concern with "the ethico-political relationship between temporality and notions of human progress," and "time appropriation" a collective action that involves blacks "seizing another's time and making it [their] own" ("Afro-Modernity" 285-296). This event of appropriation implies a rhetoric of authenticity that belongs as much to Heidegger as to cultural nationalism, despite the differences between them.⁷ Rather than insisting on the binaries human/inhuman or self/other in order to proceed to an understanding of diaspora as an ideal community that traverses national boundaries, this dissertation attempts to rethink community itself as it relates to what I referred to above as literariness, a field of multiplicities, of connections and disconnections wherein human, inhuman, self and other can be drawn out to a point of indiscernibility.

Though, like many other writers and intellectuals across the African diaspora, the authors of the present study have articulated alternative histories as a challenge to dominant historiographies in order to challenge specific political exclusions or elisions, one must be careful not to assume too quickly that this heterodox historiography *on its own* is politically subversive, or that all subversive acts have the

⁷ The primary difference between the two is one of accent. The cultural nationalist version of authenticity requires self-conscious fidelity to the norms and truths of one's community or culture, to which one has a relationship of identity or fundamental sameness, affirmed by one's acts and attitudes. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's authenticity refers to a first-person self-perception irreducible to a third-person perspective—that avoids being lost in the 'they'. The two senses shade into each other precisely around the assumption of self-identity, whether of individual or group, and the importance of a self-understanding outside of any relation. Appropriation in Hanchard's article is similarly polyvocal, invoking at once an act whereby something like the "means of culturo-temporal production" are seized and repurposed, and to the event of that appropriation, which Heidegger called *Ereignis*.

same effectivity. From my point of view, the value of such acts of ludic subversion is to refuse the givenness of the past by demonstrating the past not merely as representation, but as presentation, with its own risks and challenges. Returning to the work of Du Bois and his conception of double-consciousness, I draw out the conclusions of this non-synchronism, which puts time at the center of questions of the political not just as the "object" at the center of concrete political struggles under modernity (e.g., concerns over labor-time, due process, and false imprisonment among others) but also at the level of the *concept* of the political, as a central problem for the thought—and construction—of racial and other difference. It is in this sense that I refer to a poetics of time—acts of staging time *as* time unsubordinated to other concerns, such as history, and of thus a reworking of the relationship of past, present and future.

Time has another meaning. Implicitly subtending the concerns of this dissertation and experimental poetics more generally is the question of innovation or, as the problem is often posed within the writing, of renovation. Discourses of the new occupy two primary discursive levels. On the one hand, there is concern for newness at the level of literary form. In these discourses, newness breaks through as a "definitive break," a deliberately strange use of language that might effect a transition, citing Wittgenstein again, from one "language game" or way of using language to another, wherein neither author nor reader may initially know his or her way about. At this level, my specific inquiries into temporality concern techniques (e.g., the baroque or bricolage) wherein dead forms and dead language are rearranged and reconfigured to provoke new meanings and new ways of thinking. Here, the question is not one of better or more accurate representation or mimesis, but with the limits of organization, tumult, restlessness, in a word the production of new metaphors, literature's capacity to bring about a genuine surprise or shock. Formal

experimentation thus opens out to a future as a formal possibility, a multiple futurity filled with the unactualized virtualities of this present and other unactualized presents.

Within this literature, on the other hand, one finds concern for the Event, the new as a non-repeatable singularity that escapes present determinations and articulations. One thinks, for example, of Fanon's use of the term "national consciousness" in *The Wretched of the Earth* as a figure for thinking together the peoples of Vietnam, Cuba, and other nations undergoing anti-colonial struggle, which is always already *transnational*. The "native" peoples of the colonies become "nationalized" as a result of their resistance to colonial power and through their mutual awareness of other sites of struggle. In this way, "struggle" becomes a sign of simultaneity in Fanon's text, linking disparate peoples despite, or even because of their difference from one another, much as within a single site anticolonial struggle takes different, even contradictory forms depending on the class or group interests. "National consciousness," then, like Dien Bien Phu throughout his text, is catachrestic: it attempts to name for the future an impossible political organization needed in the present. In other words, it attempts to capture the impossible moment of the event, stipulating that this should serve as a model for other revolutionaries even as *Wretched* anticipates and asks 'when did it start to go wrong?' Implicitly, the question is whether the future will come as a repetition of the past, Implicitly, the question is whether the future will come as a repetition of the past, "the second time as farce" as Marx puts it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Fanon's analysis makes clear that mere repetition—copying or duplicating the strategies of the Vietcong—will neither be practically sufficient because of historically specific factors and geographical terrain, nor *theoretically* sufficient. The new, the event, emerges as a problem in its own right, not a question of self-differentiation of some community from capitalist

modernity, but a more general question of difference for itself, related to a question of repetition.

The example of Fanon demonstrates two things, which are central concerns of this dissertation. The first, already mentioned, is the problem of the non-synchronicity or non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous. Merely sharing a common horizon of biological time does not guarantee a common good or being-together, even within a particular site, even among peoples who putatively share a common identity. His analysis of the urban proletariat versus the rural peasantry demonstrates that, and one could go further and stipulate that similar divisions disrupt or short-circuit the self-identity of those two groups. Defined in terms of their transhistorical class interests, they act according to irrational desire on whose basis they divide themselves into groups, even as these contradict their supposedly objective interests. Thus, articulating and maintaining a people is always a problem for politics, since that unity cannot be presumed in advance. Anti-colonial struggle is both punctual and ongoing, must be considered plural rather than singular—the mere irruption of decolonizing desire, the mere seizure of the apparatuses of the state, are not sufficient on their own to effect decolonization itself, which is a process.

Implicitly, Fanon inverts Marx's temporal ordering that proceeds from tragedy to farce without ever abandoning the figure of theatricality. The decolonial rupture, "the farce of national independence," plays on some defect in the mode of the past, in the articulations of the past that have actively suppressed the violence of their own coming to be and maintenance. The initial agents of decolonization step outside of that time, as it were, not into the time of another through an act of appropriation, but into some unknown time. They disrupt the habits by which the quotidian present passively presumes its place between a singular past and future as the repetition of the former and the anticipation of the latter. Their interruption is incomplete however,

which leads to a second moment of metamorphosis, a tragic repetition in the form of *ressentiments* and retrenchments, follows; new revolutionary agents find themselves unprepared, facing an act too large for them. "The peasant masses latch onto every word and without hesitation ask them a question for which they are not prepared: 'When do we start?'"⁸ The revolutionaries, not properly a class, present a challenge to the new postcolonial leadership on the basis of memory. Ambivalent terms of identification and filiation ("We the blacks, we the Arabs") receive a "sort of sacralization" based on the past. Insofar as, for Fanon, this past is not to be valued in itself as an instant of pre-colonial or indigenous culture or epistemology, this past must be understood in its most abstract, unattenuated form, as a formal condition for the passage of one moment and the arrival of another. This points to a third repetition that Fanon adds to Marx's theatrical schema: the revolutionary moment itself, in which the present is nothing more than that which is to be effaced—an opening to the future which necessarily excludes the present and dissolves the identities of its agents. This repetition affirms the unconditioned character of the time produced in relation to the means of its production, and avoids the arrogance of the initial leaders of national independence by asserting the independence of that new time in relation to those most responsible for bringing it about. This is the Event, a differentiating instant that shatters the One, the essence, while re-opening onto the multiplicity of a given moment or formation.

These "syntheses" of time⁹—habit, memory, and a third repetition as the Event—subtend this dissertation's elaborations of theatricality. As I mentioned, the

⁸ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* Trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 27. Translation of *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), 51. Translation modified.

⁹ I draw this formulation of time as synthetic from the work of Gilles Deleuze, who makes similar arguments regarding repetition in Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* in his elaboration of a philosophy of difference. See *Difference and Repetition* trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 91-96.

revolutionary for Fanon is not a fixed class or even a self-identical agent. This is especially true following the event of revolution itself, in which all identities are dissolved. The role of revolutionary is, fundamentally, a kind of mask in a larger political theatre, a mask that has other functions and performs tasks beyond those of the agent him or herself. The same is true for the terms "blacks" and "Arabs," which are irreducible to their historical or immediate meanings in a given social order—the unattenuated past that gives these their force is not to be confused with history.

Likewise, theatricality in my analysis is not reducible to the specific histories of the stage, despite the importance of the theater to literature throughout the diaspora and postcolonial world. The concept here concerns presentation rather than representation, considering the ways literature develops its own problems or asks questions through juxtaposition, elision, deictics, and so on. Theatricality is a means of keeping alive the question of poesis, of how literature works rather than what it means, of avoiding a necessary link between figures in the literary text and figures in the world at large. Further, it provides a lever through which to think the work apart from its author, to imagine the author him or herself as another reader. It isn't that questions of representation go away—one must ask, after all, what role a given mask or theatrical element plays—but these are no longer the primary or most urgent political question. From the vantage point of theatricality, one can ask questions about the status of performance, especially music, understood to have semiotic value within a larger field of representation. Theatricality keeps the question of meaning at a distance, allowing a more fundamental interrogation into the literariness of literature—an expressivity that does not presuppose successful expression as communication—and an elaboration of the specific questions and problems it poses.

Another primary pathway of interrogation for "After the End of the World" is erotics, which here is not reducible to a dyadic or Oedipal structure. Instead, it

invokes a method, a more supple sense of relation, of possible relations, broken relations, chance encounters, and in a word, desire. The erotic does not name the same thing as desire in the sense I have used the term throughout this introduction, but rather names a specific modality of desire related to the syntheses of time invoked above, whereby pieces of the past can crystallize and resurface involuntarily. It specifies the non-coincidence of the agents of the past, of memory, and the unknown being of the agent in the Event. On the one hand, the erotic figures a being-otherwise, or a being outside oneself. It is a nomadic figure, the catachrestic name for those flows, drifts, rearrangements of actors within theatrical space broadly conceived, and an openness to what breaks through involuntarily, as a surprise: memory, fancy, fixations, the obscure *nomos* of exile and errantry. On the other hand, it names that through which selves are oriented towards a community, or distributed in an audience that is not reducible to One. Community does not take the form of a singular entity or common identity, but a constant movement of differentiation and reconfiguration. From this vantage point, my project speaks to utopia or community as an active project, if not projection.

"After the End of the World" is divided into four chapters. The first chapter, "Voices Cast Out: Beauty, Voice and the Temporality of Double-Consciousness" treats double-consciousness and the related notion of the veil and as fundamentally temporal concepts related to the time of transmission, and reading. Rather than expression, the expression of one subject to another, the structure of Du Bois' writing in *Souls of Black Folk* and elsewhere turns around what is not said, moments of theatrical silence. It opens with three silences: Du Bois' refusal to answer an unasked question—"How does it feel to be a problem"—and a woman's refusal of his visiting-card "with a glance." Throughout later writers, he invokes this putative originary scene under

similar silence, saying only that he has already addressed it. Through a careful the opening chapters of *Souls* I argue that double-consciousness—understood to be the impossibility of a subject present-to-itself without a social network that precedes it—is the condition of possibility for any experience (or, for reasons I will discuss below, narrative), rather than as a heuristic for thinking about experience. In other words, double-consciousness does not refer to the disruption of self-consciousness for black people, but obtains *in* experience as its pre-condition, taking the specific form of a non-synchronism such that identities that come about only after the formation of a nature are then retroactively understood to have preceded that formation and to explain current conditions. Double-consciousness necessarily interrupts the frames of testimony and expression, revealing an unsuturable rift in the scene of discourse. Through such conceptual reorientations and a careful consideration of Du Bois' relationship to autobiography and the historical, I articulate the relationship between politics and both poetics and reading. I go on to consider Du Bois' enigmatic essay "The Criteria of Negro Art" and his argument that art has the responsibility to "let this world be beautiful," which makes Beauty itself redemptive, a demand that cannot be fulfilled as such. The chapter ends with a consideration of the status of the musical bars that serve as epigraphs in *Souls* and epigraphs in *Color and Democracy* as Du Bois' most audacious opening of his text beyond the form of the book, and beyond textuality. With them, he articulates a graphism that is not reducible to the representation or recording of speech or thought. The sheet music, I argue, functions as an invitation to community, forwarding a notion of readership that demands active participation in the construction of meaning rather than passive absorption.

Chapter Two, "Exploding Dimensions of Song: Fugitive Articulacy and Mu-Topia," considers Nathaniel Mackey's ongoing serial poem *The Song of the Andoumboulou* and his related novel project, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume*

Still Emanate, both of which further interrogate the relationship between music and writing. For Mackey, this relationship refers both to music referenced (or described) on the written page and to poetry recited with musicians. Arguing that serialism and the repetitions and re-staging it implies challenge conceptions of the art object, analyze his ongoing serial novel *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. I elaborate the celebrated notions of "the cut" (a reference to rhythm and time keeping in reggae) and post-expectancy (the discrepancy between the present and the dreams of the past that imagined this chronological present) as chrono-philosophy, using these concepts as a heuristic for considering the interplay of the semantic and the syntactic in Mackey's writing. This play, along with the shifting subjective loci of the two series (which disrupt traditional lyric's organization of poetic experience) leads me to conceptualize what I call μ topia (mu-topia). Mu-topia is a figure for the interaction present and past, mythic and historical, dreamed and real, rendering identity in general and subjectivity in particular permeable. Through the figure of μ topia, time proves to be a discontinuous series of experiences linked not through the persistence of a subject but through reference to history, which is represented as unfinished. In both the verse and the prose, the generative force of inscription constantly opens and troubles the representation of subjectivity. Likewise, the prose series' epistolary structure, like the insistence on records and the temporal dilation of the novel's structure, augments the insistence on specific historical referent, illustrating the productive limits of history making in the present.

Considering reference to historical events and previously published works to be a fruitful line of inquiry, my third chapter, "The Then that Will Be: The Work of Dead Time and the Problem of Reference," concerns the work of playwright, screenwriter and novelist Suzan-Lori Parks. Heeding her frustration the "no one asks me about form," I read those moments of indeterminate or "dead" time, the gap

between phenomenon and writing that in her work takes the specific form of Rests or Spells, curiously unmarked moments accompanied by no other stage direction—that structure one level of time in her works.¹⁰ Reading *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Venus*, I go on to consider the effects of her reference to historical events, from the Middle Passage to the life of Saartjie Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," which often irrupt in her plays *as* text, taking the form of staged "footnotes" or performed by the chorus. These citations, pointing to the unthought within our thinking about history, problematize those readings that would accede immediately to the "African American Tradition" or "Experience," extending a critique of representation already found in Du Bois. Parks challenges the notions of tradition and experience in her theoretical writing. Her experimentation at once acknowledges the demands of history and refuses to grant it final authority, making visible the manipulations that form history, and the misfit between the people named in the historical account and those who might bear those names in the present. In her work, character becomes a platform for thinking identity a process of self-differentiation, its ambivalent location between overdetermination from without by social forces, in Fanon's phrase, and overdetermination from within. Alongside her penchant for motivating the inexhaustible energies of language and theatricality, Parks' historical tableaux inscribe the endless requirement to rethink community.

"Words to Refashion Futures: Iconicity, Fragmentation and the Plural Instant" the fourth and final chapter, considers the role formal experimentation plays in the work of Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, paying special attention to the interplay between verbal play and the material presentation of writing. I devote the bulk of the

¹⁰ I draw the concept of "dead time" from the work of Derrida who writes, in an early articulation of the notion of spacing, "Arche-writing as spacing cannot occur *as such* within the phenomenological experience of a *presence*. It marks the *dead time* within the presence of the living present, within the general form of presence. The dead time is at work." See *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 68.

chapter to his recent *Sycorax Video Style*, an assemblage of variable fonts, unusual page layout, interpolation of previously published materials (both Brathwaite's and "found" materials) and orthographic variation whose look he develops using an "outmoded" Macintosh computer. Brathwaite's poetry, like Du Bois' writing, insists on an autobiographical "I," which is constantly undermined by the disruptions of semantic meaning the graphemes—the literal marks on the page—enable. Through dilation, ellipsis, caesurae and montagic juxtapositions that break the habitual links between moments, Brathwaite's work creates at once a sense of semantic and other drift separate from explicit reference to migrations or diaspora and a tactile sense of time. One has in his work both a poetics of keeping time, the necessity of thinking fragmentation alongside questions of the formation of a people, and a bracing openness to the future.

Throughout "After the End of the World," I argue that literature does not merely express or reflect its time, but thinks in its time, the time that has preceded it, and the undetermined time still to come. In the spirit of the explicit concerns of history and the world to come, this dissertation takes time as its central problematic. We must be concerned with the specific historical situations—which are never simple, but always overlain with multiple, contradictory desires and multiple spaces of enunciation for any individual author or group of authors who collaborate. But if literature is not merely expressive of its milieu, neither is it expressive of the identity (or identities) of its author. Because literature tends to construct shared pasts and projected communal futures alongside other problems "native" to it, this dissertation operates from the level of poetics—the construction itself.

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CHAPTER 1

VOICES CAST OUT: BEAUTY, VOICE AND THE TEMPORALITY OF DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

Life after life each like it
was endlessly yet
to arrive yet
already there...

—Nathaniel Mackey

Voice and Writing

Minority literatures tend to be considered in terms of voice—finding a voice, or giving voice to the struggles of a people or one's negotiations of identity. The literary text is taken as testimony, a memorialization or sounding of the voice, metonymically the voice of *a*—or *the*—people. Found voice symbolizes a more general voice, the collective voice of shared strivings: it doubles and doubles back on the flow of voices from which it is drawn. The individual voice, understood as a function of a more general voice, becomes an iteration of the tradition handed down to it, its iteration the vehicle of that handing down. In this way, contradictions or internal differentiations, including those immanent to the "voice," become minor moments of a larger dialectic of identity and tradition formation. These authors—and this is not only true for African American and diasporic literature—are read, as it were, through an obligatory "grid" or schema of tradition, of historically determined (and determinant) identity as a necessary interpretant for literary and cultural productions.

In focusing on the *language* of literature—its semantics or thematics, which are most determined by particular historical circumstances and formations—or its referential function—that which is most constitutive of historiographies that are in turn inscribed within an understanding of history as their horizon of intelligibility—we read too quickly. We avoid or defer the question of the literary in the name of a more urgent politics, rarely pausing to think the connections between literature, reduced to a singular sense, and politics. In a word, we start from universals at the precise moment when we are most interested in dealing with particularities, with difference. Focusing on poetics or *style*—which exist in time but cannot be fully explained at the level of historical time, or at the level of biological time as we understand it—we can think of literature as practice, as a way of thinking and acting in the world. Insofar as poetics describes the working of the work of literature, it is the site of literature's opening meaning—references, themes, semantics—to time, to a time beyond or apart from itself. Attention to poetics reveals seams, moments of disfigurements; we catch those moments where, for example, identity forms and deforms itself. Above all, it keeps awake to the difficulties, and responsibilities, posed by reading. Thus, rather than attending to the voice as an established fact and locating it within a given historical formation, we can do the opposite: attend the construction or birth of voice *as style*, as a sensuous aspect that the text does not have but strains toward, then consider historical or political categories in light of the contours of the text or voice.

However, we also must ask in what is the voice of literature, and in what sense it is possible to have a voice. Who can have one, and why must we conceive of there being only one? The temporality of voicing—where one "finds" or "invents" a voice that is one's own, that retroactively produces a self as one's own—suggests that selfhood itself is an effect of this transmission. The voice, as symbolic value, is always already inscribed in a network of meanings, though this 'voice' is not *the* voice,

not "as such." To raise the question of the voice more generally, or the acts or practices of voicing without that voice secretly being merely additional content, we must interrogate the moment of listening, or anticipated listening. We must ask who listens, and above all what it might mean to listen. One—let us not yet speak of a subject—has no sooner "found" a voice than one must send it out, transmit it without knowing how or if it will be received. In this sense, the voice never belongs to the one who uses the voice, but is part of a structure of address. Simultaneously, this grammatical "one" is the residue of this given voice. The voice is not found for the self, but for other selves; at the moment of its transmission, which is its only modality of its being, the voice is neither of/from the self nor not of/from the self. It is ecstatic: it speaks to distance.

Reflecting a history of African American literary theory, we can refer to this transmission as a call. Here, the call is conceived not as a mode of bringing the self back to itself, but a dispersal of the self in the voice, the translocation of the voice to other locales where it may not be received, and will not be received "as such." Again resisting the lure of the voice as content, this dispersal is not, strictly speaking, a matter of intention. It is the *aspirant call* that awaits or anticipates a response, without there being presumed any present person who waits. Considering the voice as sound, as sound that exceeds or defers communication, there is not a question of selfhood or expression, but rather of impartibility, a desire to share or to transmit itself, and in that transmission to exceed itself.

In literature, the voice, if there is *one*, must be seen as an iteration—at once a repetition and a renewal—of some "one" that does not precede but follows from that voice. If inscription is a primary technology for "finding" the voice, and by extension a self and an identity, the experimental text that moves through a series of "voices," genres, modes and discourses. The contradictory impulses or strivings of "voices" at

odds with each other, clamoring one over the other to be "heard," provides an occasion for considering vocality, for imagining the scene of listening, or reading, as anticipated in the production of the text. To hear, to say one has heard, amounts to more than having operated according to a certain attunement of listening or transcoding—"hearing" according to conventions that shape the contours of sound into sense. Beyond this sense as sensible, hearing entails the affection of one body by another, an intimate touch of the inner ear, beyond anticipation. I can say that I expect to hear such and such notes on a musical recording, or to hear jackhammers at a certain intersection, but I can say nothing specific about the experience of that hearing, in anticipation or recollection.

As metaphor (e.g., "finding one's voice"), the voice in literature opens not only onto a question of representation, but onto related questions regarding the authorization to represent, and the relation between the act of representation, the representer and the represented, and the scene of listening or hearing, the impressions of sound. Voice, rather than being the sign or guarantee of a speaker becomes another prop in a larger *theatrical* scene, a mode of putting in scene and enacting, of staging and the conventions through which the staged metonymically displaces its putative referent. Representation is a kind of "language game," a way of using language within certain limits which are revealed when we ask about its fidelity or consistency, or about the priority of an original over the copy. This particular "game" encodes mechanisms and conventions for filtering out that which does not that which does not fit the frame or transmission. There is always an interval of condensation or transcription; the production of identities entails multiple, related acts of naming and renaming, and thus the suppression of difference required to make a concept or Idea, which then becomes the referent of representation, the subject of the voice. From this perspective it is clear: representation refers not to things "in the world," but to prior

inscriptions. This is as much as to say representation, understood as a perspicuous correspondence between sensuous or non-sensuous objects in the world, is impossible. It happens as an act or mode of reading, of closing off possibilities of reading in order to produce meaning at the expense of the sensuous experience of the work, and its complexities. However, the work of literature is not exhausted in its referential or indexical function. The voice, in the expanded sense of the term that remains attentive to the projected scene of listening, is one name for that which breaks the frame of reference, shattering it with a force that is not its own: a power, as it were, that stands against Power.

To begin to apprehend literary voice in this sense, as dispersal and anticipated sounding or resonance, we need neither an anthropology of reading or hearing nor a sociology of literature or of sound to describe the encoded values of the text or access, both of which rely on an abstraction: *the* reader, *the* listener. What is needed is a concept of the voice, a thinking of voice that does not take it for granted either as a given or as immediate. Insofar as it relates to any possible voicing, the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, and especially his early conceptualizations of double-consciousness and the Veil provide a necessary example through which to think the place of the literary, and 'representation' as both a political and literary problem. To the extent that we read subjective consciousness as Du Bois' primary concern—in a line supposed to follow without pause or aporia from the Hegelian dialectic of recognition to the historic-political subject—we miss the most radical kernel of his thinking. As I will argue, this thinking concerns the partition of time, and the limits of a given social formation, the conditions and for subjectivity and its undoing in and through listening, and reading. Closely reading his texts—especially *The Souls of Black Folk*—I consider the function of silence or refused speech (rather than the suppressed or unheard voice), both within his writing and as an effect of his writing as an index of what could not (or cannot) be

"voiced" or thought, but still resonates from the initial sounding. Of particular importance in this regard will be a critical re-reading of Du Bois' formulations of double-consciousness as a temporal concept—rather than historical fact—and of the privilege he gives to writing. Following his program of "patient reading" with attention to the poetics of his text, political concepts emerge thinking apart from those defined by representation or the immediate social context. Du Bois' does not emphasize "finding a voice"—intimately linked to "denying a voice" to that difference within the same—so much as the scene of listening, and those ecstatic moments where the "voice" is liberated from its referential or representational functions to affect some imagined receivers who are constituted as a people, or a community. Du Bois' name for this affection is Beauty.

Discussing his pre- and interwar activities in *Dusk of Dawn*, Du Bois writes that "it had always been [his] intention to write," and "to seek through the written word the expression of my relation to the world and of the world to me."¹¹ This is more than an incidental chiasmus. It indicates, on the one hand, that any such relation is not automatic, or automatically guaranteed; such relation, while constitutive, is not necessarily reciprocal. On the other hand, it privileges writing—his long ambition—as his primary mode for thinking, rather than expressing, that relation. Expression becomes the end result, the object, rather than the means. In what follows, I argue that representation for Du Bois is a problem immanent to the structure of the text, and that his collage-form text, blending the modes of autobiography, sociology, history, and fiction in a densely layered, allusive text is the opening of a rethinking of the categories of identity, nation, and so on. Simultaneously, I consider the ways literary form complements and extends his arguments. Careful attention to his writing as

¹¹ *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005), 238. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Dusk*.

medium will reveal the representation's impossibility, and suggest pathways for rethinking the relationship between art and politics, for reimagining both the "strange meaning of being black" (refusing any single definition or "black experience") *and* the dawning of the twentieth, now twenty-first, century.

Promissory Note: An Account of the Self

In his *Autobiography*, Du Bois refers to *The Souls of Black Folk* as "memorandum of [his] 25th birthday."¹² Simultaneously an injunction to remember and an informal inscription of memory, a memory aid that, as such, aids forgetting, "memorandum" is an ideal term for this collection—thirteen essays and one allegorical short story published as a book in 1903, nine pieces having been previously published as early as 1897. The topics range from his experiences as a teacher in Tennessee, a traveler and anthropologist in Georgia, a young man in New England, and so on, with these experiences serving as examples through which the "strange meaning of being black" might be learned and imparted. Privileging the essay form, Du Bois does not make his observations or revisions responsible for unearthing "timeless truths" (of blackness), but rather makes the "transitory eternal" by presenting the transitory, the already passed, in the form of a demand.¹³

The essay is both of its moment and, through the objects it chooses, attempts to transcend its moment. The individual essay, often occasional, relates to the others with which it is collected, even when collected in a contingent fashion, reaching after understanding it does not have. The essay is exploratory, produces knowledge, true to the literal meaning of its name. In this way, the essay is the ideal form for the patient

¹² *The Autobiography of W.E.B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of its First Century* (Canada: International Publishers Co., Inc., 1968), 13. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Autobiography*.

¹³ I am drawing here on Theodor Adorno, "The Essay as Form" trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, No. 32, (Spring - Summer, 1984), 159.

study Du Bois calls for in his Forethought.¹⁴ For collection and republication as a book, Du Bois added graphic reproductions of sheet music of the antebellum "Sorrow Songs" (figuring "echo[es] of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past"). He paired these with epigraphic citations from the Bible, Goethe, Schiller, Byron, Browning and other figures of a legibly "white" European and American tradition (save the final essay, "On the Sorrow Songs," which was added upon publisher's request and has as its verbal epigraph lyrics from "When I Lay My Body Down"). On the one hand, these juxtapositions can be read, facilely, as performing the "two warring ideals in one dark body" Du Bois describes as the condition of the Negro in America, offering a model of synthesis or syncretism (one that would stop short, however, of showing the mutual co-constitution his text otherwise implies). One may also read these epigraphs (and similar allusions throughout the text of the essays) as producing a kind of uncanny doubling that does not so much make the so-called Western tradition "speak from the margins" as point to the quixotic nature of the quest for "one's own voice," the debt one's originality owes to that which has preceded him or her, those "traditions handed down as second-hand soul clothes."

It does not seem accidental that he would place authors responsible for producing the "cultural treasures" of Western literary culture alongside the "haunting melodies" of the "Sorrow Songs." Indeed, the consistent citations and allusions not only supplement his self-professed indifference to mere "meticulous and fastidious phrases," but also introduce a notion of bricolage and spectral inheritance, the obligation to pay "tributes to Beauty". No doubt, to claim one "sit[s] with

¹⁴ Though I am following Adorno's distinction between the essay and the scientific treatise, in Du Bois' essayistic endeavors it is important to remember his commitment to producing a body of knowledge. As he writes in his *Autobiography*, "people are thinking wrong about race because they do not know," with the implication being that "The Negro Problem was... a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding," and pedagogy (*Autobiography* 197).

Shakespeare" confers value onto Shakespeare, while in the same gesture declaring oneself—an unexpected black "guest"—to be heir and custodian of that culture. At the same time, rather than suggesting subordination to that tradition, this imagined encounter further implies that an exchange takes place, that as one takes from Shakespeare, one gives to him. Thus, Du Bois' gesture is not mere "mimicry" of Western tradition in the sense of repetition or aesthetic semblance, but a critical, performative enactment of tradition, a reiteration of tradition that self-consciously uses the non-self-identity of any tradition, the constitutive openness of tradition. This "openness," though multidirectional, is not reciprocal; the relation between two traditions, or rather the non-relation that results in the articulation of two distinct traditions, is subtended by material relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation. These epigraphs and allusions are more than Du Bois' attempt to inscribe his writing within a tradition, or make the observation that the hands of marginalized "darker peoples of the world" helped construct that tradition directly and indirectly through the free time their un-free labor allowed the nascent middle-class for study and writing. They also mark, as it were, a kind of debt, or a line of credit—these things "are not without *interest* for you."¹⁵

This "credit" is not some contingent power or recognition granted by an autonomous, fully formed subject to another autonomous fully formed subject, but rather is another name for the recognition that one gives to the other in order that s/he may have self-consciousness at all. The "Western Tradition" is treated *as if* it were self-evident and obvious, but also open, and illimitable: it is expanded to include the broadest possible range of influences, the broadest possible range of directions. "Western Tradition," then, is at once treated as simultaneously extensive—circulating

¹⁵ Du Bois, *Writings* ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 359. Emphasis added. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Writings*.

through certain texts and proper names—and intensive, naming a potentiality yet to be realized in any of its works. If Du Bois sits *with* Shakespeare, Balzac, Dumas, et al., then those people also sit *with* Du Bois on the basis that each lends identity to the other as the implicit "co-signer." The epigraphs draw attention to this previousness, this pre-original contamination that makes a singular, pure origin impossible, and all claims to such origin attenuated by the encounters with alterity that spur the creative act. Through this contamination and the specificity of the historical situation Du Bois is concerned with, the Euro-American tradition becomes "universal," unless that universality be thought in light of the veil, and thus name an *impure* subject, determined as it determines, thought as it thinks. Du Bois' claim to "sit with" emblematic figures of European modernity draws attention to that imprecise, never present moment called "beginning" with regard to the work of art, striking at the heart of questions of "originality."

Rather than insist on the provenance of the literature, its belonging to a "white" tradition being subverted or opened up by bring brought into contact with the abjected or disinherited, a question is opened about the use of literature at all, and the schemas through which presumably distinct literary traditions emerge. In *Darkwater*,¹⁶ Du Bois "experiments" with "little alightings of what may be poetry," which he calls "tributes to Beauty." In *Dusk of Dawn*, after he calls "the development of literature and art among Negroes through [their] own writing" as "an old ideal and ambition," he continues to draw on literature and music as figures for thought, using musical citations as postscripts in his *Color and Democracy* (*Dusk* 268). For Du Bois, who eventually assigns art the task to "Let this world be Beautiful," Beauty is redemptive, an inexhaustible demand that initiates but cannot be fulfilled as such. Literature,

¹⁶ *Darkwater: Voices Within the Veil* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), xxiii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DW*.

insofar as it privileges a density of references and meanings (rhetorical, semantic), offers a space where transformations may be pre-figured, re-figured, or promised. In Du Bois' hands, literature exposes readers to crises—those historical crises on the level of events that it represents, and the crises of representation, the expressionlessness of the veil itself: it cannot be spoken, but it is that without which one cannot speak.

We return to questions of speaking, of not speaking or refusing to speak, now through the visual metaphor of the Veil. In order to fully grasp the complexity of this set of concerns, it will be helpful to consider the status of the autobiographical—of Du Bois' irruptive "I"—within his formulations, as a particularly literary problem of his thinking. Insofar as double-consciousness names a temporal structure involved in any auto-poiesis and any account of the self, such accounts have a special status in the elaboration of the concept, both of double consciousness and of what Du Bois will later call his "race concept." An anthology of previously published essays, *Souls* self-consciously negotiates the norms and conventions through which it will become legible as unified text, a book, even at the expense of political clarity or consistency. Through its varied modes of writing, the text stages the slippages and asymmetries between the particularity of individual lives (including Du Bois' own) and the general plight of blacks who find themselves a particular instance of the general condition of the "darker peoples of the world." The primary means through which this prismatic schema achieves coherence is through the rhetorical figure of prosopopeia, the logic of which retroactively creates the presence of the one absent or, as is directly referenced in *Souls*, dead. Death in *Souls* is accumulative, self-reproducing, irruptive, and ubiquitous, showing itself in the scene of autobiography, heightening the tension implicit in the logic of representation so that if Du Bois represents the folk, they represent him as well.

Part of the difficulty of this "race concept" is race's tendency to congeal into "a matter of unreasoning resentment," an over-identification with one's own autobiography as globally true about the race with which one identifies (*Dusk* 132). If, following De Man, autobiography is "a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts" whose moment "happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution," then the process Du Bois describes is one in which the "specular structure is interiorized," without the author being able to declare him or herself "the subject of his own understanding."¹⁷ Insofar as the autobiographical "I" is prosopopoeiac, referring at different times to Du Bois and the eponymous black folk, its identity is deferred even as it is presented as if it were stable or self-evident; the effect becomes the cause. The instability of reference here—the vacillation between metonymic and synecdochical, between contingent and transcendent example, is the crux of the political problem Du Bois confronts us with. Reading the autobiographical instances throughout Du Bois' writing reveals the deferred fixing of the identity of those souls and the self-referential author, and, by extension, avoids fixing the "strange meaning" of blackness. Such "meaning"—which shifts over time—suggests that though "the Negro" is treated as a given, it is only ever a *potential* value (without being merely "pure" or "empty" form or potentiality). This meaning is always produced for and within a community of language users, despite the ways in which the English language leads one to assume a fixed and stable referent for each word. The

¹⁷ Paul De Man "Autobiography as De-Facement" (*MLN*, Vol. 94, No. 5, (December., 1979), 921. Also relevant is his prior observation: "We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and this determined in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium" (920)? Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as "De-Facement."

requirement of patience modifying the activity and pacing of reading suggests the need for theoretically endless re-reading.

While autobiographical reading preserves the importance of writing to Du Bois' project, it is slightly misleading, as it implies a myth of interiority. However, here I would like to re-orient the terms of the discussion to ask about the status of Du Bois' autobiographical example. His writing may be thought of as a work of critical *poiesis*, through which the norms and conventions that govern his recognizability on "either side of the Veil" can be limned, brought out "into the open." Because of the reversibility whereby Du Bois represents others as much as he is represented by them, the "self" of autobiography is generalized; it becomes an empty site of articulation, an absent or aporetic cause, a structure of potential and composite life—the Negro appears *ex negativo*, as an absence that "presents" itself by "being" absent, as caesura or syncope. This syncope is always before the rhetorical subject of his writing as its groundless authorization, an unsettled and unsettling question that makes readers responsible for the "strange meaning of being black *here* in the dawning of the Twentieth Century." These readers include Du Bois himself: "I pray you, then, receive my little book in all charity, studying my words *with me...*" (*Writings* 359, emphasis added). Positioning himself as a reader of his own text and as a part of his project links Du Bois' autobiographical subject with his nominal object of study through a shared historical horizon typified precisely by the asymmetry of access to the means of literary production.¹⁸

¹⁸ For this reason, I disagree with Shamooun Zamir's claim that Du Bois' notion of double-consciousness was largely determined by his own position as a "bourgeois intellectual," who understood himself to lack access to the interior of the "black mass." Du Bois' text raises as an open question whether any such mass existed *as such*. Further, the structure of *Souls* and his repeated claims regarding the "message" or "gift the Negro has for the world" call into question the extent to which his position as bourgeois is to be seen as ideal or, as he contends throughout much of his writing, merely contingent and thus secondary to his concerns. See Zamir, *Dark Voices: W.E.B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. pp. 133-153. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *Dark Voices*.

His deployment of autobiography is deceptively simple, appearing to draw on an empirical uniformity of black folk rooted in his sociological study or on reified notions of "*the* black experience." Instead what is shared is the "strange experience" of being inside and outside of the definitions of America, and the attendant structures through which this "strange meaning" is articulated as at once outside and immanent to those bodies called black. This is the structure of sharing itself, though that sharing is named in its absence. It is through the thought of this tenuous, minimal commonality that Du Bois proceeds, and it is through this that the stories he tells of others speak for him as much as his narratives constitute the folk before the Other without the appropriative logic of identity or Absolute Spirit. This expanded, specular use of autobiography splits the book between the historical analysis of a single man and the historical analysis of a race, effectively arresting Du Bois' figure, the "I" of his text, between synecdoche and metonymy.

The tension between modes of representation, and especially between incommensurate temporal registers—a stubborn non-synchronism—haunts *Souls of Black Folk* from the first lines of its prophetic, proleptic "Forethought": "Herein lie *buried* many things which if read with *patience* may show the strange meaning of being black here in the *dawning* of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader, for the problem of the Twentieth Century *is* the problem of the Color Line" (*Writings* 359, emphasis added). This initial metaphor, likening the book to a tomb or catacomb, designates the text as a site with unknown volume, an essay, broadly conceived, that avoids any first principle—when were these things buried? By whom? And when are the times of these buried things and people that nonetheless live on and animate thought in the present? We can add to these questions a new one: what is the time of Du Bois, of Du Bois' thinking? What is the specificity of his Twentieth Century? The ambivalent spatiotemporal structure, the

arrested beginning, becomes increasingly relevant to Du Bois' analysis. It asserts a logic of continual re-working, reiteration and repetition even at the level of form. His observation that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line," for example, is a repetition of Du Bois' own prior text, "To the Nations of the World," from the first pan-African conference; it is later repeated within *Souls* in the essay "Of the Dawn of Freedom."

The phrase "the problem of the Twentieth Century *is* the problem of the color-line" is a performative utterance presenting itself as constative, descriptive of actually existing facts and people. The color-line becomes the necessary condition of possibility for the marking of the coming epoch. It is not continuous with history as the extensive history of known facts—the history of oppression and deprivation, for example—but rather gestures towards a dissimulating force within such historical narratives and proceed as a progressive line as the history of present beings or "Great Men." The color-line calls into question the conditions of possibility for the emergence of such beings, while simultaneously insisting on the composite nature of Time, split between the official, dominant narrative Time, the disparate times not counted, partially counted or thought past from the point of view of that dominant narrative, and the resonant time of this text and this text's "voice," oriented toward an audience it anticipates.

The metaphor of the book-as-grave in the "Forethought"—"Herein lie buried"—and the references to the immortal (untimely, a-temporal), transcendent *Souls* of the title mark it as a song or elegy, the relation between the already and not-yet of every moment of time, pointing to the impossible coexistence of multiple "compossible" times. Du Bois' text stages the problem of simultaneity of the non-simultaneous, "a certain complicity or coimplication *maintaining* together several

current nows [*maintenants*] which are said to be the one past and the other future."¹⁹ The problem announced by the color-line is the problem of *temporalization*—putting-in-time—and *punctuality*—the subordination of several nows to a single timeline: a single past, and a single ineluctable future—in a word, *modernity* as progressive development. The proclamation that the color-line *is* (*will have been, is to be*) *the* problem surpassing or informing all other problems "we" will have to solve in the twentieth century, marks an opening, a possibility and a threat, a warning against attempting to settle the so-called "Negro Problem" too quickly. One needn't assume any fixed identity to the "Gentle Reader" addressed in the Forethought, despite the apparent presumption of that reader's indifference to the "strange meaning" of "being black" in Du Bois' moment or our own; the allegorization of the specular autobiographical "I" is complete in this gesture, including the author within this potential readership. The "strange meaning," like all meanings and conventions, is subject to change, as is the "soul" of the folk, despite its pretense to eternity, the possible presentation of the present, the passing of the past; in short, it is the impossible figure of the *fulfillment* of time. The much discussed "prophetic voice" of Du Bois announces nothing more (and nothing less) than a performative disruption of the discourses, including America's "Hegelianism," that provide ideological support for the brutal oppression and exploitation of "the darker peoples of the world" and other subjugated groups by naturalizing that oppression as historical necessity.²⁰ This "prophetic voice" attends to the differential sites of the dawning of an epoch. The differences in articulations and interpretations of the meanings of an epoch and its problem supplements the autobiographical "I" by refusing to remain fixed to a

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1982), 55.

²⁰ It is easy to overlook Du Bois' interest, especially in later works, in thinking about the exclusions of the Italians and Irish, for example, within the determination of whiteness, as it is to overlook his abiding, if tentative, concern for the "woman question" and class differences, particularly in his later writings.

particular referent, in this case the biography of the writer, pointing ceaselessly to the future lodged *in* that past as its potential, its constitutively unrealized or outmoded.

Prophecy may be thought of as a self-conscious poesis based in the structure of credit I have been discussing. In *Souls*, this prophecy is figured in both the "borrowing" and re-contextualization of the "cultural treasures" of the West, and through the articulation, as threat, of alternative futures based on those times excluded from official Time, that is, the threat of a sudden reversal of fortunes. As threat, prophecy takes on the form of the *promise*—I am pledging to you that this will come to pass, promptly. In its written form, it becomes a *promissory note*. This structure gives us another way of thinking about the Negro's proleptic "message for the world." In the context of this "originary debt" or loan, to repay is to "return" or reject a particular support of self-consciousness—to act as though that support were no longer valid or necessary—and in so doing to effect a shift in the norms through which recognition occurs. At stake in the fulfillment of this promise is nothing less than the apocalypse, a collision between incommensurate times, the coming of a time not speakable on conditions of the articulated present. The promise is predicated simultaneously on the possibility of its non-fulfillment and the unknowable future. Du Bois' call for "patient" reading postpones the first condition—that the promise must risk its own fulfillment, its *promise* so to speak. If the reader fails to see this repayment in full, the impossible "full" revelation of the promised truth, it may be due to a failure in his or her reading. The citational term "Negro Problem" attempts to sidestep the condition of the unknown and unknowable secret by providing a certain conception of "the Negro"—a conception that "is" (if it "is") "owned" by no one—as collateral. However, this appellation alone does not tell the nature, form or scope of the problem posed by the color-line, nor the outcome of the promised apocalypse.

*Ellipsis: W.E.B. Du Bois' Sound of Love*²¹

I turn now to a central concept-metaphor of Du Bois' writing in *Souls* and elsewhere, the Veil, which he introduces in the famous initial formulation of "double-consciousness" in *Souls of Black Folk*. Though we know that Hegel's philosophy was much discussed in late-19th Century America²² and that the term "double-consciousness"²³ had been used by such thinkers as William James (Du Bois' favorite professor at Harvard), Du Bois' use of the term "double-consciousness" to describe a temporal disruption makes me resist a strong paternalist reading (James read Hegel and his contemporaries' readings of Hegel; Du Bois read Hegel and James' reading Hegel...) that would link his thought directly to those others as a simple continuity. While other thinkers used the term "double-consciousness," it is not clear that those other thinkers were articulating the same concept. Aside from the ways Du Bois' text complicates the position of the writing vis-à-vis tradition, relying on the texts of Hegel or the later interpretations of famous American "Hegelians" simply avoids the responsibilities of reading, either Du Bois or Hegel. Du Bois' use of the term "double-consciousness," like his use of the term "Negro" entails the burden of paleonymy; the use of old concepts to play the part of something absent, or nameless.

Though not visible, "the Veil" rests on a visual metaphor, an interruption or division *in* vision itself. But while the color-line has to do with putting objects in place within history, with temporalization, the Veil is more directly concerned with

²¹ The reference here is to Charles Mingus' tribute to Duke Ellington recorded on both *Changes One* and *Changes Two* (Rhino/Atlantic #71403 and #71404, respectively). Pertinently, Mingus' psalm to Ellington includes the lyrics "I was young and carefree/ Not a song had found my soul," and describes a process of finding that song through a process of recognition.

²² See especially *Dark Voices*, 113-168 for an example of the argument linking Du Bois to the prevalent, contradictory Hegelianisms of his era and his teachers.

²³ For an analysis of such prior uses, see Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., "W.E.B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness," *American Literature* 64:2 (June 1992), 299-309. Bruce stipulates Du Bois' originality in using the term "to characterize issues of race" and sees him drawing on the philosophies of American Transcendentalism and German Romanticism along with medical discourses of "split personalities."

concepts (such as history) and their relation to phenomena, with the conditions of epistemology or determining concepts and theories. Schematically, one might understand the "color-line" to refer to synchrony as a condition of possibility, and "the Veil" to refer to diachrony, the conditions of possibility for naming an I continuous with itself. However, the color-line is the necessary precondition for the emergence of the Veil, the Veil is the necessary precondition for any awareness of the color-line, which is only apprehended retrospectively, even as it "colors" introspection and reflection. The two terms cannot be collapsed into one another: each is the other's inverse, with the key difference being that the Veil, and especially the promise of unveiling, opens onto the (conditioned) thought of an unconditioned future, a future imagined on terms other than those of the present. The Veil is in this sense a messianic figure for the passing of time, the potential (and potentially) redemptive end of time. *Souls* provides a key—in its own writing, which is thus the inscriptive unity, the articulation, of and for the Veil: the construction of the un-constructible, thematizing the temporal lag of specularity, the mutual co-determination of center and margin. Ultimately, the Veil establishes double-consciousness as a kind of *pas de deux*: both the steps of a dance and a division that yields more than two distinct or even halves.²⁴ The Veil does not refer to phenomenology's intending subject, nor the psychological subject of cognized experience; instead, the Veil is a figure through which the givenness of the world as given, the dead time that haunts each articulation of the world "as such," a dissimulation of "organic" or "natural" totalities.²⁵

Though "the Negro" and "the White" constitute each other *as* Negro and white, respectively, the color-line suggests that this difference is originary in the determination of a given time, such as modernity. Modernity, like capital,

²⁴ Through this pun, I mean to refer to both the steps of a dance, and also the French phrase loosely translated as "not both" or "not two," a reading I will develop.

²⁵ I return to this notion of dead time in chapter 3, through my discussion of Suzan-Lori Parks.

constitutively creates, assumes and depends upon its others, those out of step with its time. The Veil, on the other hand, figures the struggles over the meaning of race's uneven divisions and the definition of official Time, and its potential end. The Veil marks the inescapable mediation through which individuals and experiences come to be (mis)recognized, over identified with their structural positions. Through it, self-consciousness is revealed as an allegorical play in which people think of themselves and each other as personages within some "authentic state of affairs" that prove fictional, irretrievable as "authentic" or unmediated experience. Race is not merely allegorical figure, "an abstraction whose original meaning is even more devoid of substance than its 'phantom proxy,'" but rather occupies an ambiguous position between material and immaterial; the Veil is a non-sensuous sensuous, a "phantom devoid of shape and substance," not a presence but the affecting *absence* of a relation that has never been present.²⁶

Read in this way, the historico-allegorical accounts Du Bois gives of "the Negro" in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" or the contemporary "The Conservation of Races" (1897) are not attempting to narrate history "as it was" but as negotiable, incomplete, and still capable of opening onto other, unrealized possibilities, in distinction from, for example, the ideology of Manifest Destiny.²⁷ Du Bois' attempt to "rise above the pressing, but smaller questions...to survey the whole question of race in human philosophy" in order to lay the groundwork "of broad knowledge and careful insight" upon which "those large lines of policy and higher ideals of which may form our guiding lines and boundaries in the practical difficulties of every day" runs aground of the aporetic nature of those "natural laws" he appeals to, precisely because

²⁶ De Man, *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 192.

²⁷ As Du Bois puts it in "The Conservation of Races," the "resulting problem as to the future relations of these types [the White and Negro races] is not only of intense and living interest to us, but forms an epoch in the history of mankind" (*Writings* 815).

of the ways in which the Veil is a naturalizing force that partitions even knowledge and historical fact (*Writings* 815). The Veil, like the structures of racial differentiation to which it corresponds, is not so much "natural," as naturalized. It is a kind of prosthesis, like eyeglasses; one looks through it but cannot "see" that looking. Through repetition and ideological necessity, insofar as race emerges as a justification for exploitation, it comes to seem a feature of the natural world, a permanent, unassailable structure, one that cannot be thought since as part of the ideological substrate that structures discourse, it is immanent to the innermost part of thinking itself. There is not and has never been *one* Negro Problem, and that Negro Problem is not independent of or secondary to other concerns so much as the "Negro" masks the articulation of the greater social network in which it plays a part. The Veil, then, is a figure for emplotment.

In the initial account of double-consciousness, occurring at the beginning of the chapter titled "On Our Spiritual Strivings," this partition takes the form of a gap or fissure within what proves to be a failed exchange. The essay begins:

Between me and the other world there is *ever* an *unasked* question: unasked by some through feelings of delicacy; by others through the difficulty of framing it. All, nevertheless, flutter round it. They approach me in a half-hesitant sort of way, eye me curiously or compassionately, and then instead of saying directly, How does it feel to be a problem? they say I know an excellent colored man in my town; or, I fought at Mechanicsville; or, Do not these Southern outrages make your blood boil? At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boil to a simmer, *as the occasion may require*. To the real question, How

does it feel to be a problem? I answer seldom a word (*Writings* 363, emphasis added).²⁸

The preposition "between" establishes a narrative, or at least the possibility of narrativizing, always already *in medias res*, formally if not in its specific content (although that there is "ever an unasked question" shows the limits of this distinction). This question remains—haunts—the text of *Souls* as its primary question. There is a *rapport sans rapport* between the specific comments or questions the "other world" sends back to "me," which are nevertheless not wholly separable from each other since they share language, and conditions of discursive intelligibility. Again the Problem is of reading: three different kinds of statements are held to be metonymic substitutions for the question that cannot be asked.²⁹ "Between" marks the "site"—*there* or *herein*—of differing/deferring, an illimitable *rapport sans rapport*, submitting identities to constant re-articulation.

The Veil is most decisively affixed by attempts to remove or see beyond the Veil, to ask, in this case, the black person to unmask himself—to "speak in his or her 'own' voice" which amounts to saying the voice through which s/he is allowed speech—and give an account of his or her suffering. Du Bois' performative silence, a figure of apophasis (saying by denying one is saying), doubles the initial silence, the initial apophatic question that asks without asking. Though he claims to answer "seldom a word," he submits in his book to the implicit interpellative demand that he *narrate* his having come to racial consciousness, of having recognized the Veil: a tall

²⁸ In a similar scene in *Darkwater*, two pertinent questions are "Do you know where I can find a Negro cook?" and "Why-won't-Negroes-work?" leading to a similar silence, and a similar exercise of writing (109).

²⁹ Nor should it be thought, however, that this situation is strictly a racial conflict. It is also a conflict between Northern and Southern moral positions, "Progressive" and conservative ideologies, marked by class and gender: The positions within double-consciousness are *pas-de-deux*, not (just) two.

new-come girl refuses his visiting-card, "peremptorily, with a glance," a wordless, apophatic glance subject to interpretation following which "it dawned on me that I was different from the others," similar "in heart and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil" (*Writings* 364).

This story, though, which he invokes in later writings under a cover of continued silence or refusal to speak (in both *Dusk* and the *Autobiography* he writes only that he has written this incident previously, tacitly reproducing its performative silences), is staged as a myth. A similarly significant silence or textual gap announces his shift from the general to the autobiographically specific: the revelation "bursts upon *one*, all in a *day*" during "the early *days* of rollicking boyhood;" he continues, "*I* remember well when the shadow fell upon *me*" (*Writings* 363, emphasis added). In this narrative, "something put it in *the boys' and girls'* heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards...and exchange." The visiting-card is a kind of promise. Usually a small piece of paper bearing the giver's name, the visiting-card is given as a promise to visit, or as an indication that a visit has happened, and will recur. The exchange of visiting cards mimics adult behavior, at the nexus of business and courtship relations. If we assume this incident is not chosen arbitrarily, if we resist the temptation, that is, to quickly declare that this is *the* moment that expresses "the strange meaning of being Black at the dawning of the Twentieth Century," then the function of this narrative, and the sudden awareness, lies in the refused encounter.³⁰ Her refusal is synoptic: in showing the impossibility of a certain future, it reveals those structuring presuppositions through which possibility is calculated, and through which possibility differs from potentiality in general.

³⁰ Du Bois elsewhere describes his coming to race consciousness as a more gradual process. See especially *Autobiography* 83-94

The gender dynamics, like the curious timing, are not accidental.³¹ The status of gender and the everyday notions of the erotic, of desire and sexual desire, of the Negro's "longing" remain. As I have suggested, the narrative of coming to race consciousness is staged as a myth, then referred to apophatically throughout Du Bois' other writings: it provides a text which in turn produces an event that is not one. Du Bois writes,

[B]eing a problem is a strange experience,—peculiar even for one who *has never been anything else* [...]. It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon *one*, all in a day, as it were. *I* remember well when the shadow swept across me. I was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England [...]. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into *the boys' and girls'* heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused *my* card,—refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil (*Writings* 363, emphasis added).

Here there is an abrupt, unjustified specular shift between the many and one, the "I," and back; this particular experience is made to stand in for all such

³¹ My interest here is in determining the generative value of his having chosen and repeated this particular narrative to account for his coming to race consciousness in general, which is a separate issue from the masculinism of his public persona. Thus, Hazel Carby's arguments about the construction of the "particular personal, political and social characteristics of a racialized masculinity to articulate [Du Bois'] definition of black leadership," and personal persona, are of a different order. The complexity of his text may work against the "philosophy of moral uplift" associated with him, for much the same reasons that I argue his recourse to "Talented Tenth" ideology is merely a stopgap. See *Race Men* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 9-45.

experiences, which are eternal ("has never been anything else"), which is to say ideological. The "certain suddenness," then, is mythic—this experience provides a way to narrate an otherwise unavailable "experience," which is not one. Desire here is strangely *impersonal*—it is auto-telic, existing to reproduce or naturalize the heterosexual dyad; this setting-in-scene is also a setting in narrative abîme: "*something* put it into the boys' and girls' heads" to exchange visiting-cards, to mime the romantic rituals of adults. Certain "gendered structures of thought and feeling" (Hazel Carby's phrase) seem to function as the presumptive horizon of intelligibility, the support for this narrative, and are exploited.

For all that, however, it does not seem to be the case that sexual difference as such is naturalized, so much as the relations encoded in the word "gender" are taken as natural in order to give meaning to the structures of race within narrative he tells. Gender, in this sense, is a supplemental structure that animates the incident, and intersects with the narration of coming to racial consciousness. Given miscegenation's function as one of the most enduring ideological props of segregation and Jim Crow, we might think that Du Bois deploys not simply the feminine but the form and generative potentiality of the erotic. The thought of a successful coupling between Du Bois, "bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil," and this (presumably) white girl, the thought that she might accept his promise and await his future visit, would have been taboo and ultimately threatened to rend the social fabric as it is. Beyond the risks associated with some presumed audience, this staging is a profaning or de-sacralizing gesture—a kind of "profane illumination" to which gender is instrumental. As a moment within his auto-poiesis, this myth is a temporal "sign"³²—in time as the start of time, as that instant whose repetition is not traumatic,

³² By this I do not mean that the story "contains" time or "expresses" time so much as it puts temporalization on stage.

but transformative. In repetition there is a subjunctive transformation of available forms of intercourse. Du Bois *strategically* risks alienating his readership, effecting a dislocation between persona and message, again within the structure of the promise, or prophecy. He is able to mobilize the structural fears of miscegenation to effect a reversal whereby it goes from being the cause of segregation to one of its effects, simultaneously.

The "tall newcomer," occupying the structural position of the feminine pole of a heterosexual dyad, gives what she does not have: "knowledge" of (and an occasion to acknowledge) the Veil, which in turn becomes an invitation to give to the world, an awakening of the impulse to give. However, neither knowledge nor epistemology is not at stake in this passage: time is. By refusing to make time for Du Bois, by refusing a place within a flow of time—the proposed visit at an unknown point in the future—she gives—creates the conditions for—time to think, whose outcome is the formulation of the Veil concept, of knowing what the young Du Bois already knows. Time "does not properly belong to anyone; if certain persons and certain social classes have more time than others...it is certainly not *time itself* that they possess."³³ With "a certain suddenness" Du Bois realizes or diagnoses that certain opportunities will be unavailable to him due to the ways his race is articulated, that like the "would-be black savant" the fundamental conflict takes shape around differential time, "the most serious stake of political economy" (*GT* 28). This newcomer does not so much "give" this knowledge so much as demand its thinking. Fundamentally at stake in this episode and others throughout *Souls*, including those that do not directly strategically engage a thought of woman, of those who can be called by the name "woman," is a relation to the Law, before which Du Bois describes himself as subject, both subject to

³³ Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 28. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *GT*.

the law and object upon which the law would act. The appropriative narration (moving from the general to the particular and back to the general) of his discovery of the Law in the attempt to transgress the law establishes the possibility of founding a different Law, one in which the Negro's "message for the world" could become intelligible, allowing" a different conception of present and past, and thus the future. Like the "tall newcomer's" or Du Bois' own remarked silence, the "Negro's message for the world" may indeed "be" a kind of communication that is not yet intelligible. Through playing the irreducible nature of the gendered erotic against ideological understandings of history (where a given moment in the "present" is the fated outcome of particular past events) and its meaning, Du Bois creates a space for a thinking that is disjoined from its own present, or "out of its place" in the racist cant of his day. He plays on tropes of unruly eros common in literature, and scandal (which has its etymological roots in snaring), particularly around the scene of pedagogy,³⁴ to set a scene where thinking emerges *because* of diverted desire rather than being destroyed when subjected to desire's denial. The narrative shows the *pas de deux* of this would-be romantic union, the multiple times that intersect through this refused encounter.

The Other's points of view, this narrative suggests, must be taken into account, though such accounting will always be incomplete. The insistence on these gendered figures throughout *Souls* complicates binaristic understandings of "double-consciousness" by revealing internal divisions further differing/deferring any potential identification, including the transition from *one* to *I*. It also reveals something of the fundamental misfit between name and named, the strange temporality whereby the name seems to precede its object, seems to produce its object *after*, on condition of, the conventional or ideological framework that precedes it. By preserving the place of

³⁴ One thinks, for example, of Canto 5 of Dante's *Inferno*, where Francesca and Paolo's fateful union is initiated during their reading of courtly romances.

"woman" or "the feminine," Du Bois offers a double transgression of a certain orthodoxy—the agency that might "put things in mind." This transgression makes visible in the object of inquiry what the orthodoxy by definition suppresses, raising for readers the question whether there can be any perfect alignment between object of knowledge and real object, between name and named, between representation and represented.

The tall newcomer's response to him is a telling glance; his response is "seldom a word"; the Negro's response is "longing," which may or may not be verbalized. In all instances, relation itself is refused, or revealed to have been impossible. Refused relation creates this longing, that is, implies that relation had been presumed, marking the resistance of the Other, the sounding of the other within the self, which is to say a certain desire for the Other. There is no (double-)consciousness without this resistance, no "unveiling" that does not run up against the Other's irreducible alterity. If the introduction of this mythic narrative traverses several substitutions before producing the autobiographical "I," those substitutions stop at the radical non-substitutability of the gendered other, the unknowable part of the other that motivates erotics.

This erotics is not the fantasy of the other as an extension of the self, or the other as an external cause responsible for one's capacity. Rather, erotics must pass through the irreducible alterity of the other, through the non-substitutability of the other, poses a dissimulative threat—the threat of ecstasy in its fullest possible sense—even to those discourses by which it is expressed, if it is expressed. Erotics here is the name for what remains constitutively foreign in, though required by, desire, in discourse. I do not refer here to that which is "in you, more than you," but to a "part" that is *neither* owned nor interiorized anywhere. Erotics, then, is a syncope of thinking, a sublime passage "between" that suspends or defers the movement between

the phenomenological subject and the political subject, the dissimulating both through the suggestion of an intersubjectivity prior to phenomenology's intending subject and beyond the presumed relations between people in political space. Like the words Du Bois seldom responds to the question no one asks, or the glance of the tall newcomer, the erotic specifies a certain constitutive reticence, a syncope of discourse. Thus, erotics names the risk and promise of a literal ecstasy—the subject's (if we are justified in using this term) standing apart or outside itself—that does not emanate from or return to a singular individual or subjectivity. On this view, to say that double-consciousness obtains in a broken or refused relation is as much to say that double-consciousness releases the erotic. It is synoptic insofar as it marks a situation of silence, of not knowing how to proceed because it reveals the inadequacy of conventions of speech and inscription, reveals those schema or norms that distort understanding. It does present itself, but "works" through adispossessing negativity, submitting subject positions, those historically rooted identities that, so to speak, underwrite the conditions of intelligibility.

Like love in Jean-Luc Nancy's account, the erotic "is sexual, and it is not: it cuts across the sexes with another difference...that does not abolish them, but displaces their identity."³⁵ Unlike love, however, the erotic cannot be uttered. If love's utterance "is a promise...an utterance that draws itself before the law that lets it let appear," and according to that law can be judged true or false, the "expression" of the erotic is impossible, an ellipsis or caesura. It is not a given word or a promise that can be broken or threat, but the potential dissolution or rerouting of the word. In Du Bois' staging, his choice and reiteration of this originary narrative marked by its status as repetition, the silent newcomer refusing his visiting-card initiates another scene, an

³⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: The University of Minneapolis Press, 1991), 101.

identity, a politics, a demand for a writing that is not merely a description of what has happened but of a different order of thinking. In context, the newcomer's glance remarks awareness/articulation of the Veil, with this slash meant to instantiate a certain caution regarding the actual timeline of his becoming aware of the so-called Negro Problem, which has a certain historical specificity, and the Veil, which has conceptual specificity. The several remarked silences in this text—the black boys' "*silent* hatred of the pale world about them," his student Josie's growing silent as she works, his character John's having become "*silent* and cold" or the "old bent man" who chastises John "with rude and awful eloquen[t]" words the text declines to reproduce—present similar ellipses, and express a similar want for new means to apprehend and change the world, for concepts where those are missing. I return to this point at the end of this chapter. Through the erotic's syncope, *between* must remain partially unresolved, apprehended imperfectly through retroactive narrative accounts. The profundity of Du Bois' spatial metaphor must be noted: it is not "between me and the other" or Other, but "between me and *the* other world." Despite the definite article, however, the position of that "other world" cannot be fixed, or tied to a specific or metaphoric site (e.g., the American South, the "White community").³⁶

The "other world" posited on the other side of the Veil, no doubt, has religious connotations. Space and time are linked through the figure of prophecy, whose discursive status skirts the need for permission to write elegies for the dead, or those who will be dead, and it is through the logic of prophecy that Du Bois seeks a space to

³⁶ Though this reconfiguration of the erotic as that which effectively prohibits substitution sets a limit, it is possible to see the tall newcomer as the inverted rhetorical double of Du Bois in relation to his readers insofar as he reads and names the Color Line and exposes the pre-existing norms about which she remained silent while enacting, and which the rest of the world seemed to pass over in a "conspiracy of silence." This does not mute or annul his decision to make her a tall newcomer to his self account as "a little thing," but rather opens it to further complications.

articulate from the "other side" of the Veil.³⁷ One notes, in this regard, Du Bois' declaration that "The problem of the Twentieth Century *will* be the problem of the Color Line": his declaration takes the form of a simple observation about a time to come, rather than a promise or command that we make this a problem. The appeal, that is, is to a time that *will have been*, imagined from a perspective after the end of the existing order: it marks an attempt to get out ahead of one's time. However, this prophecy must always attempt to skirt or exceed death, to have already passed through death and speak from the other side *of the vale*. The living exceed the frame of representation, differ from and defer representation. Like prophecy, representation can only refer to the dead, multiply the death through its reducing its object into ordered sensibility.

This mimed religious discourse, however, must not lull us into performing a "faithful" reading of Du Bois' text, which would amount to reducing it to the genre of the sermon or liturgy, a jeremiad against the specific problems of his historical moment. The reader faces the aporetic nature of autobiography as a "figure of reading" whose moment "happens as an alignment between two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutually reflexive substitution," here multiplied insofar as Du Bois at times figures himself as addressing those on the "other side" of the Veil ("De-Facement" 922). One might extend De Man's observations about autobiography to questions of representation in general, particularly in Du Bois' case where expanded, specular use of autobiography splits the book between the historical analysis of a single man and the historical analysis of a race, effectively arresting Du Bois' figure, the "I" of his text, between synecdoche and metonymy. On the other hand, the prophecy itself is partly determined by the

³⁷ This strategy is employed most dramatically in *Darkwater*, especially "The Souls of White Folk," where he refers to his position "high in the tower...above the loud complaining of the human sea."

prosthetic structure of the Veil, which is only partially subdued by the suspended non-place/non-time of the prophetic voice, which lacks the (racialized) body the autobiographic form provides. If the autobiographical voice invites an ideological, naturalizing link between the writing, written and reading subjects, the Veil is the figure that intercedes, exceeds and defers such recognition.

What remains curious is the situation of the Veil, more precisely its non-situatedness, as in the following passage:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that the Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (*Writings* 364).

The erotic is one name for this strife, which defers this merging into a "better and truer self." Indeed, Du Bois' refusal to proclaim a desire for an either/or reduction of the self into a singular identity is perhaps the most radical of all of his gestures, insofar as it calls for a redefinition of both terms. This refusal marks the excessive character of the identity—figures identity as a representation always more and partially other to itself—suggesting a non-resolution of a dialectic between self and Other that is not tragic, but makes identity iterable while denying anything other than a negotiable,

formal origin from which the Negro would subsequently figure as a "problem." Neither of the "old selves" is lost through striving, but neither signifies the same thing; internal differentiation and fragmentation within a single body or within racial populations become the starting point of politics that do not presume unity but rather start from difference and fragmentation—"a mass of bickering people." That the names "Negro" and "American" would be retained following this impossible "merging" of identities is affirmation of the risk of paleonymy referenced above, and the two are coordinated under, or alongside, the term *Africa*. A palimpsest within the construction and maintenance of separate White America and Negro Slave, *Africa* operates as synecdoche for blackness "as such" and a sign of unassailable difference—the impossible point, of "origin." Despite the efforts here to reinterpret it, Africa is a sign of previousness that antedates Europe's initial contact with Africa or the New World.

The terms of that temporal positioning are affirmed through the acknowledgment that "America has *too much* to teach the world and Africa"—pointing to the excessive, threatening nature of the gift, which as gift must be unexpected, and non-reciprocal. This gift of "teaching," impossible *as* gift, threatens always to turn into a debt or responsibility (i.e., no gift at all), much like the equally menacing "message" "Negro blood" has for the world. It is precisely at this moment, with so much at stake, that Du Bois' text slips into a discourse of liberal individualism—the world to come is here suddenly only (though given the historical context this is not an insignificant demand) the bestowal of formal political freedom without the necessity or obligation of assimilation. The refusal to assimilate remains the radical component as it threatens the very definitions (and, in this way, positions) of *America* and *Africa*, and of "being black." What emerges, for this reason, is a tension between two senses of freedom in Du Bois' text: on the one hand a political

freedom—the demands and rearticulations that would have been consonant with contemporary ideologies that amounts to access to political and economic institutions—and on the other a more evasive "genuine human freedom"—those challenges that demand a fundamental change in relations, an undecideability that is the possibility of going forward. After all, calling for the Negro to live as both Negro and American and, as such, to change and disfigure *American* in that very process is already radical, even if the ultimate resolution of double-consciousness, if it is possible to speak of such a resolution, suggests that the very terms be replaced with some as yet unknown terms. The "message for the world" cannot be an institutional message or demand as yet unanswered, but retains itself as an encounter, yet to come.

Propaganda and the Im-Parting of History

I turn now to the status of the artwork in Du Bois' writing, and by extension the precise notion of reading so far developed. In his 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art," a transcript of a talk given to consider the relationship of the NAACP, a "group of radicals trying to bring new things into the world," to artistic production later published in *The Crisis*, Du Bois famously declares that "all Art *is* propaganda and ever must be." He adds that "whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy." He concludes, "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent." This set of propositions is far more complicated than it initially appears, especially when one asks what it means to declare both that all Art, by definition, *is* propaganda while also insisting that all art *ought* to be *used for* propaganda. Du Bois links art with imagining a world—and a politics—beyond immediate concerns, and a duty to "let this world be

beautiful." Du Bois' play on the "is/ought gap" points to an aporia between the artwork as structure—e.g., a set of social practices called "art"—and as reference governs the scene of reading (or, given that this essay was first delivered as a lecture, of listening), including the "patient reading" he calls for in *Souls*' "Forethought." Does the status of the artwork depend upon its *being*, such that its propagandistic function rests in its presence—either, that is, its having been produced by blacks who have been excluded from the means of cultural production by the collusion of racist structures within society or the structure or grammar of the artwork itself? Is the claim that art (or Art—we must not fail to notice the shifting status here) must within itself stage or "give voice" to political or social strivings, offering itself as a symbolic "reflection" of or imaginary "solution" to concrete problems, or that the encounter with the artwork makes thinkable what was heretofore unthinkable? Along similar lines, ought the emphasis be placed on the *uses* to which those who encounter the artwork put it making the call for an insistently propagandistic *interpretation*, such that the work is taken to be "really about" social or political questions (e.g., the Negro Problem)? Rather than resolving this aporia, the essay develops it, declaring both that "until the art of the black folk compells [*sic*] recognition they will not be rated as human" and that "it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty." For this task the Negro is to use time-honored "tools" including Truth ("the highest handmaid of the imagination, as the one great vehicle of universal understanding") and Goodness ("in all its aspects of justice, honor and right...as the one true method of gaining sympathy and human interest") (*Writings* 1000-1002). In this articulation, the artwork's vacillation between the immediate and the eternal, calls for careful attention to the ways the artwork, identified largely throughout the later essay with the literary

text, opens out to or interpellates an audience "beyond the narrow now."³⁸ One must have a materialist outlook of the conditions of the emergence of the artwork, *and* a materialist conception of the function of the artwork *as* artwork, even as this latter commits one to that special form of speculation called criticism.

As with Du Bois' cryptic claim that each race has a "message" for the world, insisting on the historical individuality of all peoples, which emerge as a result of the differences inscribed within and between communities, may be necessary for local understandings, but they work against this "universal understanding." However, the apprehension of such differences is the only means through which any universal understanding is possible: it does not belong to the voice but is that which makes any particular sounding or iteration of voice incomplete on its own. From this perspective, the term "propaganda" is also polyvalent, invoking at once the text at the referential level (those events or people the artwork depicts) and, schematically, at its critical level (the thinking it motivates or its way of resolving conflicts). Elsewhere, emphasizing pedagogy, he refers to the "underground propaganda" that "the trained man of darker blood" will have to resort to in order to "organize his world for war against Europe" without which the future, rationalized as the fated outcome of the present, "is going to be based essentially upon the same policies as in the past" (*DW* 60). Insofar as those "trained men" work within the ideologies of their day, and reproduce them without respect to their will or intention, their "propaganda" rests in the sense of their words, a quality that they do not "have," and to their texts as that rift

³⁸ Those examples are apparently extemporaneous scenarios that illustrate the viciousness of racism—e.g., a "brown" daughter who commits suicide when she is not allowed to attend her white sister's wedding, a white woman who extorts money from a "colored lawyer [surrounded] on all the other sides [of a town square] by men who do not like colored lawyers" by threatening to scream if he refuses her ransom—and the ways in which racism constrain the possibilities for black artists and black art in the United States. Curiously, David Levering Lewis' *Reader* omits the literary examples but keeps the historical ones that tell the "untold tale" of colonialism and world events.

between grammar and reference. Propaganda will be a name for that which slips through and exposes the grammar of possible thought.

The very word "propaganda" suggests seeds sown to produce or reproduce, to multiply or cause. It has a similar sense, to the word *radical*, whose etymology links it to the Latin *radix*, or root, but with the following wrinkle: this seed reaches back from a *potential* future to establish roots in this present, attempting to subvert or elude the calculable possibilities of the present. From this vantage, propaganda is not limited to promoting actions or "sympathy" in the present, but can make possible a thinking of the future (and a redemptive re-thinking of the past) by limning the boundaries that structure thought in the present. The thought of that future entails negotiating on their own terms what Wilson Harris calls "the adversarial contexts in which cultures wrestle with each other" in order to grasp, despite the "camouflages and masks," the myths of cultural origins and heritage, the "flexible frames within the mystery of genuine change."³⁹ The statement "all art is propaganda" does not lay a claim for Sartrean commitment, but rather a claim that art always contains and stages a contest over origins, always exceeds the conditions of its creation and reception to point to an unknown and unimagined future. To say that all art *is* propaganda in this sense simply identifies a structure of Art, of all doing or making. To say that it *must be* becomes a declaration that criticism—the "free and unfettered judgment" of every person, whose "valuable and eternal judgment" in turn requires that *we* make *ourselves* "free of mind, proud of body and just of soul to all men"—must promote thinking, and thus not content itself with interpretations or perspicuous readings. Interpretation may be a valuable place to organize such a critical practice, but it can only be a transient moment geared toward further thought.

³⁹ Wilson Harris, "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity" *New Left Review*, 154 (November/December 1985), 128.

The challenge for the artist, especially the "marginalized" artist who works from a disempowered position within a social context, is to work through double-consciousness as the co-existence of incommensurate temporal registers within the literary and historical text. On the one hand, Du Bois sees the darker races "as though in this morning of group life" and, extending the metaphor, having "awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future," whose Youth bears "on its breast" as "a mighty prophecy" capable of actualizing a "new determination for all mankind" (*Writings* 995). Because double-consciousness rests on an historical determination marked by "accidents" or "contingencies" that determine who will have access to social institutions, it opens onto the many different subject positions we occupy for any number of people, and the irreconcilability of these determinations, with given a priority that seems absolute. When Du Bois offers criteria for *Negro* art and then describes the characteristics of *all* art, the conclusion to draw is that art in general, and "Negro art" in particular, can and must do more than "represent" the beauty of the phenomenal world, but must seek to produce Beauty that is still only potential. The prophecy or message of the Negro is *for the world*, inscribing "universal understanding" in the future, when all races will have delivered their messages for the world, that is, in a future community.

There is, however, another stream of history that we might call, advisedly, an "everyday" conception of history as given or a political history, one which takes the people not in its becoming but in what it is understood to be and to have been. Du Bois writes, "We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes of white patrons" and the "growing black public still wants [of] its prophets" or artists the same things that the more established white public, steeped in the historical practices of minstrelsy, demands (*Writings* 1001). It is to this historical present that Du Bois addresses his demand that art be used for propaganda. Insofar as

his demand is that the artist strive to present an undistorted Truth, the paradigms through which the artwork is received and the constraints under which the artist works shift the locus of emphasis from artistic intention or perspicuity of representation to the opposite: moments of opacity, illegible moments that place a demand on thought that it exceed itself. There is nothing about the artwork or literary text that performs this task: the search for "criteria" for Negro art is an appeal to community, to the future community where the historically unique races he discusses can deliver their messages to the world. Such opacity, moments that stall or defer meanings that are only apparently clear, emerges through a critical practice—a "patient reading"—attentive to the mechanisms of meaning, the ways the artwork undoes itself and its meaning, attentive to the striving to "say," potential voice, the mechanisms of delivering a message: an impartibility that extends beyond immediate circumstances, beyond immediate message. Without that reach beyond the narrow strictures of its present, without attempting to find the eternal within the transitory, then there is no possibility for propaganda in the sense of building toward the future, only the propaganda of immediate solutions to immediate problems, with those solutions rooted in the inadequate thinking of the day. Only through and because of the debris of history can the world to come be prophesied, projected to an audience to come. It is to the fallen present that Du Bois tenders the demand to "let this world be beautiful," and "for Beauty" set right (995).

Beauty, though it has many functions and uses throughout Du Bois' writings, is one name for the perspective of redemption from which all the races' messages will have sounded. "That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive," he writes in "Criteria," "but here and now in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable" (*Writings* 995). In *Souls* Beauty is either on the side of a "natural" harmony seen as discord in the

present—"The *innate* love of harmony and beauty that set the ruder souls of his people a-dancing and a-singing raised but confusion in the soul of black artist; the beauty revealed to him was the soul-beauty of a race which his larger audience despised and he could not articulate the message of another people"—and the gift—"little of beauty has America given the world save the rude grandeur God himself stamped on her bosom" (*Writings* 366, 536, emphasis added). Whereas *Souls* seems to oppose beauty and "ingenuity," ("the human spirit has expressed itself in vigor and ingenuity rather than beauty"), by the writing of *Darkwater* beauty *requires* ingenuity: "Unless men rule industry, can they ever hope really to make laws or educate children or *create beauty* (*DW* 122, emphasis added). These two texts mark a fundamental shift from beauty as an attribute belonging to the fundamental nature of things to beauty as the outcome of labor. Beauty is both that which has no purpose other than itself *and* that which promotes thinking of things as they are, but due to material constraints, cannot be.

The outcome of this shift, already present in the formal presentation of *Souls* if not always apparent in the body of the text, is a decisive turn away from the ambiguous movement between the specific black person and the transhistorical figure of the Negro, which is an allegorical figuration more than a citation of "fact" or "essence." The shift from a thought of "the soul-beauty of a race," the specific beauty of the race as it would be apprehended from the impossible perspective of this world, redeemed, accents the discrete and momentary over and against the assurances of the ideology of history as a progressive line, or the progressive development of a singular essence. The message each historically unique race has for the world is not the transcendent Truth sounded at last at the end of a dialectical movement to uncover the Absolute, but above even Truth, Beauty. From this, we can infer that even so-called representational or "realist" fictions, on demand that they be propaganda to be

worthwhile, need always to be attempting to restructure and re-present the past and the present toward the glimpse of a future anterior.

I would like to underscore two essential points: 1. Du Bois never shies away from the difficulties of creating a people, and in no way takes for granted that there is a pre-constituted, self-announcing people that could be the subject of politics, or serve as a final definition. In this way, he does not collapse the experience of the diaspora to a uniform experience of slavery or oppression. For this reason, too, he avoids ontologizing "the Negro" or linking it to a predicate "resistance"—his analysis of the art-consuming and producing Negro public would render this view unintelligible. Thus, he holds open a place from which to think about "the Negro's" relative autonomy within a field of power (one of whose conditions, as may be clear from the tropes Veil, color-line, and double-consciousness itself, is belatedness). As he puts it, "We are bound by all sorts of customs that have come down as second-hand soul clothes" (*Writings* 1001). The *political* problem of forming a people remains one of the chief problems in Du Bois' thought for political work in the present, though it is not at all clear that this people would be perfectly aligned with the historically unique race or its message. And as the use of gender in the earlier text suggests, any people formed is formed based on its unsurpassable internal differences.

2. To the extent that Du Bois does not reify a singular "black experience" as the ground that "Negro art" is bound to express, the place (which is not one) from which it propagates its "message for the world" is in some future that can only be approached through a rigorous negativity. It is not this world, nor the (political) freedom to pursue material gains—"powerful motor cars," an "elaborate estate," becoming a "Rotarian or a Lion." Du Bois' notion of the work of art is likewise opposed to the reclamation of some loss or submerged origin. Privileging Beauty—as that which transcends the conditions of the present—the artwork reaches beyond its

time, always just out of reach and away from view until the advent of genuine human freedom, the right to tell the whole truth, or deliver the full message to the world. The past, then, is not a resource or ontological guarantee of resistance, just as the people cannot have a singular "essence" to be expressed for the present. Further, he does not assume some "pure African form," "expression of memory" (Baraka), "black phonic substance" (Moten) or "slave sublime" (Gilroy)⁴⁰ to which the work refers or that it expresses. Its "rootedness" in the future-as-utopian-imagining splits the work of art between two incommensurable time frames—not just production and reading, but reading and re-reading, opening the work to its own futurity and potential obsolescence. In this way, the efficacy or felicity of Negro art can only be determined from an unknown future, perhaps one not intended by this present.

Coda: Voicing Music

To conclude, I would like to return to the concerns of voice with which I opened this chapter, away from the question of finding or having a voice, speaking with a voice, the futures of such voicings and listening: echoes. Such echoes, which permeate the "haunting music" of what Du Bois calls the sorrow songs (themselves a metonym for tradition in general), re-inscribe temporality into tradition and introduce the possibility of decay, signal interference, dispersion and transformation: the possibilities of multiple sounds present in any unitary sound or note. This multiplicity is not an external force of impurity but is an internal, material attribute of sound and its reception, as contradiction in the naming of tradition, and as a conflict between the immateriality of "tradition" itself and the materiality of sound. Echo aligns itself with noise in an attempt to detail the impossibility of the source or origin of sound except as a named origin, as a potential interrogation of political potentialities in working the materiality of the artwork. Such manipulation works as an implicit critique of history

⁴⁰ The texts alluded to are *Black Music*, *In the Break*, and *The Black Atlantic*, respectively.

conceived as an externally given, progressive narrative (e.g., of New World slavery and subsequent colonial and neo-colonial subjection) as the always available "home" or "essence" to which the work has a pre-determined relationship such as a note has to a chord. Considering carefully the metaphoric and analogic resonances of "home" or "root" as the tonic in a given harmonic structure, the creative context can be understood as a *figural* or *articulated* site that must be continually constructed and reconstructed, negotiated within the work. Such a conceptual re-orientation creates a contingent, agonistic space for rethinking displacement or the status of being "unhomed," an unhomely site from which to re-imagine political agency, to orient the demand for Beauty.

Beauty itself cannot be constructed, only striven toward. A poetics that pursues the echo and thus privileges noise, or what is considered to be noise, suggests one path toward this expansive sense of beauty. Such poetics are seek to hold or possess without possessing. These poetics imply an ethos to pursue the not-yet realized, to resist satisfaction with the present or historiographical narratives of resistance and overcoming. They inscribe a responsibility to remain open to the freight of speaking in the present moment, of the unredeemed nature of the present and its status as 'world of tomorrow' that may not live up to yesterday's cultural or even individual dream, even as the present strives toward another 'world of tomorrow' that cannot yet be brought into words. They refuse any one home as the home, or its home; they keep a place for the past that speaks in the present as a "tasteless seed" and the ways the present will speak—will have spoken—in a moment that is more than the future, singular, of all the disparate, susurrant pasts and presents that co-exist in any moment.

In this spirit, I would like to turn anew to the status of the epigraphs in *Souls*, especially musical notations that head each chapter of *Souls*. As I have suggested, it

will not do to consider them merely a sign of memory of some pre-digested past, or to argue that they serve to dignify the "sorrow songs" with which they are paired. The repetition, temporal displacement, and especially the openness of language to its own inevitable obsolescence implied by Du Bois' arguments for art being propaganda are crucial to the narrative development of double-consciousness, and in the concept itself, as we have seen. One cannot speak without ambiguity of a "subject" of double-consciousness, or of double-consciousness as the "symptom" of incomplete subjection or failed interpellation: if it is such a symptom, it is equally a less determinate gap, a specter within knowledge and epistemology, within ideation, a foundation that initially appears (though it never appears) solid only to crumble or disappear, unspeakable. Simultaneously, double-consciousness demands such writing and articulation, such patient study. The challenge Du Bois' writing leaves us with is that of finding a way to speak of oppressive structures such as race—if these *can* be spoken of—that does not simply affirm the terms of those structures and its history, where the latter is oriented toward this present (and the future as a future present). The challenge is to conceive the future as a future anterior, as a now that might not come, or may not come in the terms anticipated when we, in this moment, attempt to articulate the future, a necessary task to all politics. The challenge for creativity in adversarial contexts is to find ways to proceed that treat the temporal gaps in such structures *strategically*, to desediment oppressive institutions and practices without accepting that oppressive logic, that, in short, does not take the two positions implied by double-consciousness as having been given in advance, and thus fateful.

Du Bois gradually abandons completely the idea of conventional political representation on the model of speaking *for* a self-identical, historical group in favor of a more flexible model closer to something like speaking *with*, a notion already graspable in the emphasis on education and on the elite living among the people. Less

a reserve of plenitude "in the past—as designation, representation, artwork, thing" that waits to be made present through reflection or contemplation, we might think of music as on the side of action or, again, a negotiation that is not a quality of any existant.⁴¹ The sound, if there is any, is not a present sound, the sound of beings or Being, a sound of union between the past and the present; it is not subject to (or of) any *lichtung* or clearing, but is only the sound to be produced and known, if it is known, in the ephemerality of its production. As multi-reedist Eric Dolphy once said, "When you hear music, after it's over it's gone in the air. You can never capture it again."⁴² On the one hand, Dolphy is wrong—through transcription or phonography, we can hear it again, re-apprehend it, analyze it exhaustively within technical limits. On the other hand, however, he is right—you cannot *capture* it again, to replay the record is to hear it in light of having heard it already, a practice that changes the listening and the thing listened to. If it speaks it is because it is made to speak, with all the responsibility entailed by that making speak.

Du Bois asks that readers study patiently, *with* him, but we might re-accent this as a call to *think* with him, to attend especially that we attend to the fragmentation of the people, the "fundamental miscount" involved in the articulation of any political group, and our own fragmentary identifications, the way his text like his mythic letter misses its recipient. This is the promise of being both "a Negro" and "an American," where we understand that the former term is wholly contingent upon the latter, and that the latter can have no meaning apart from the former. It is possible to see in the structure of the book—its fourteen chapters plus a Forethought, with each chapter headed by a signed quotation and an unsigned fragment of music, added prior to their collection and publication as a book—support for a re-evaluation of the fragmentary.

⁴¹ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005, 148.

⁴² Eric Dolphy, *Last Date* (Verve 822226).

While it is true that the " music acts more as a repetition than a recollection ... moves toward the future rather than toward the past," it does not necessarily follow such citation the impossibility and necessity of " an *epistemology* of the future that is not eschatological," unless "eschatological" names the uncertainty of the communities that will have received his book?⁴³ After laying out the conflicts between levels of discourse and of history, Kevin Thomas Miles sees in Du Bois the invocation and promise of a far off "*kairological* event."⁴⁴ From that perspective, the music might remind "us in the fashion of art that we cannot remember the voicings of these melodies," while requiring recollection as repetition, which might "serve to excite a movement within our own souls similar to that of love" ("Music" 213-4). The music, that is, would find its "text," a *specific* topography and history of subjugation and support of a black aesthetic tradition in the United States, a position from which would neutralize (or sublate) the anarchic potential of these "non-textual," uncanny epigraphs. After such an event, the event of the full word made manifest and audible, the full meaning of the text—the Negro's full gift, as it were—would be available. Any such "full meaning," however, would be indistinguishable from an ideological or fateful confirmation and validation of what is already known, settling too cheaply the problem of double-consciousness and neutralizing the destructive potential of an ultimate unveiling or apocalypse. The music quotations are unsigned and unnamed, uncommented on save a brief index in "On the Sorrow Songs." The additional reading we are responsible for—the repetition that is also a recollection—is both part of and furthers a project of knowledge implicated by double-consciousness itself. How would one assign value to these songs, transcribed in the keys of F, G, E-flat or A,

⁴³ Kevin Thomas Miles, "Haunting Music in *The Souls of Black Folk*," *boundary 2* 27:3 (Fall 2000), 199-214. Hereafter cited as "Music."

⁴⁴ *Kairos* refers to "the propitious moment for the performance of an action or the coming into being of a new state," or the "fullness of time" (*OED*)

especially given the imbalance of knowledge between those who would have sung the songs and those who notated them, those who can recognize them on sight and those who know the songs only when they hear them?

These graphs of music create an uncanny doubling, calling to mind not an effable or ineffable past, but a kind of future anterior, the call to necessary incompleteness, that is, to thinking *politics*, but also *thinking* politics. The music, inviting repetition, rudely introduces another time, demands a reorientation of thought, precisely through their mute, glyphic structure, which further defers reading, positioning the "strange meaning of being black" in an indeterminate future, always later, always awaiting definition, differing/deferring the final message, for example the inscrutable message the Negro blood has for the world, until the audience "hears" it—though they will not hear the same thing twice. Though they are the partial graph form of a music that speaks to the legacy of slavery and "spiritual strivings" (both in a religious sense and not), these glyphs themselves are mute and, even if played, fragmentary, being just enough of the song to create a haunting echo of a song that's never really been heard before.⁴⁵ Insofar as "these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the world...tell[ing] of death and suffering and *unvoiced* longing toward a truer world," to perform this music at all is to attempt to "give voice" to, or find a way to hear, those longings, to speak with those specters that continue to haunt not just American institutions or African Americans, but in the contemporary world of late-capitalism the global institutions that affect the lives of all the "darker peoples of the world" whose fates are inextricable from their Others. Performers are obliged to re-

⁴⁵ It is perhaps too esoteric for this discussion, but the notations are abbreviated for space in some cases, and in all cases lack the specific information of harmonic modulation (chord changes) that would allow an accompanist to provide support for whomever played or sang the melodies (and the lyrics are not present). A skilled arranger or accompanist could take the melodies and devise harmonic structures that would be wholly incompatible with the songs as they are known, but that would nonetheless be satisfying. See, for one example, John Coltrane's re-harmonizing of "My Favorite Things" or "Body and Soul."

create the song through collaboration, especially those unfamiliar with the songs. Thus, in the end, it is not—cannot be—Du Bois who has something to teach his audience. Rather, he presents readers in his present and ours with an enigmatic code for all to decipher endlessly, together.

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CHAPTER 2

EXPLODING DIMENSIONS OF SONG: FUGITIVE ARTICULACY AND MU- TOPIA

To the extent that our senses have moment
meaning is fragment
– Ed Roberson

"Throughout the piece, one finds the music actively and unremittingly heterospecific"
- *Bedouin Hornbook*

Mu: "The Root of Whatever Song"

Not to get to the "origin" of song, the fleeting moment of a transit or transfer between poetry and music, music as dwelling in poetry or poetry in music. Instead, the question, again, is of listening, of the "graphicity" of sound, of writing. That music has served as a resource for many poets—influencing structure by analogy between music and poetic composition, or providing poetry the occasion or subject—is well-documented, particularly in the case of black writers. But musicality—the thinking or qualities of music not exhausted in any listening or analysis—is by definition excessive: listening again to familiar or treasured recordings often yields new details, reveals the self-differentiation or constitutive incompleteness of a given work. Music itself is linked at once to memory, commemoration and the forgetting of self, the ecstatic loss of self to the extent that music may *involuntarily* "set the ruder souls...a-dancing and a-singing." This orphic capacity is not *of* or *in* the music as an in-dwelling tendency or presence, nor as the residue or haunting remainder of some

history, but rather refers to the non-analysable part of the performance, of the song or lyric: what I will refer to as its μ topic (mu-topic) striving. This striving is not related to the will of the performers; it has nothing to do with traditions of performance but on the contrary relates to the scene of listening, communities of listeners. It is glimpsed in breakdowns, in those gaps between a work as structure or grammar—adhering to conventions—and the work as an iteration through which something unexpected might break through: a "certain arch and/or ache and/or ark of duress, the frazzled edge of what remains unsung."⁴⁶

The relationship between music and writing is not transparent or without ambiguities. Literature may "borrow" or transcribe techniques—e.g., motivic repetitions, serial composition—to generate new compositional possibilities, cite musical performances or recordings, or it may attempt to represent distinctly musical effects in language, pushing language aslant from its presumptive referential function (including onomatopoeia) to explore other capacities and possibilities of language. Taken together, these techniques, all of which are present in the writings of poet and novelist Nathaniel Mackey, exploit music's general pull or torsion as part of a subterranean effort to question the status of the literary text, of representation in literature, and its movement along the axes of convention, or paradigm, and recombination, or syntax. Lurking behind my analysis here is a continuation of the previous chapter's effort to consider "black inventiveness," the condition of writing as a black author in a context where one is allowed only certain kinds of utterances, without determining in advance, "from the outside," the direction or provenance of the work as responding to, resisting, or subverting this or that conflict "in the world" that

⁴⁶ Nathaniel Mackey, *Eroding Witness* (Urbana (IL): U of Illinois Press, 1985), 54. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *EW*.

the text is presumed to represent.⁴⁷ The binary of oppression/resistance makes negativity—rejecting, subverting or critiquing a given paradigm or set of norms—the primary point of interest of African American or other minority literature, with the unintended consequence that the otherness already suggested by the use of "African American" to modify "literature" ceases to be merely descriptive, but becomes an active othering.

Musicality and the utopic raise the question of originality apart from the modification of given ideas or forms, and open the question of the relation between a work's sensuous or aesthetic qualities and the socio-political milieu in which it emerges, which is never a simple situation but it always crossed with multiple, contradictory impulses. Musicality, often considered by philosophy to be mere materiality that, without text, lacks the power to appeal to the understanding, will be central to thinking of literature's fugitive spirit, the violations of the paradigmatic by the syntagmatic, its own materiality and organization on the page that exceeds hermeneutics. More than noise, such moments are like propaganda's seeds. They suggest a fugitive articulacy, impossible "speech," irreducible moments wherein something genuinely new becomes thinkable, something that may be, as it were, "from another time." Generally, my question is what links can be drawn between music—music as material practice, musicians and/or sound recordings—and time, the given or staged time of the text, and of reading and writing? What thinking is made available by those writing practices, especially experimental writing practices, that cross music with poetry, rendering the boundary fluid if not merely nominal, making each the other's supplemental "flipside," such that it is undecidable whether one should refer to "post-bop" poetics or "open form" musics? More specifically, what difference is there

⁴⁷ "Other: From Noun to Verb" *Discrepant Engagement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 265-285. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DE*.

between a poetics that, using musical techniques, reaches toward alternative imaginings in and of language, and a poetics that cites musical examples as a *symbol* of dissent, discontent, or critique?

Nathaniel Mackey's work, which I consider in this chapter, deploys music—music traditionally associated with African American culture, music of the African diaspora more broadly, and other "world music"—as referent and structuring principle, linked to a "practice of outside," a constantly deforming and reforming "tradition" that is never more than an articulated whole, a graph of linearity. This work is one of encounters, staged and missed, unlikely confluences, mis- and re-alignments, progressing through a commitment for open-form, serial poetics that allows for—indeed courts—repetitions within which new connections become available. He produces an aesthetic informed by lack or "wounding," an anti-nostalgic relation to the past that articulates a claim that time's arrow implies a two-way transit, less concerned with redeeming (or representing) past sufferings than demonstrating the intrusion of one moment on another, often through the mediation of music. Any articulated past, e.g., the personal past or the past of an historical group, is only one possible past cited in the interest of notions of a particular present, or desired future. That the past remains open is a condition of the coming of the future. Mackey's preference for serial poetics, and the repetitions such a writing practice inevitably entails, allows for a temporal logic similar to that of the phonograph. One does not hear a moment mummified and repeated without loss across all contexts and time, but a ceaselessly reiterated and thus revised and rearticulated moment that highlights the discrepancy between the sound one hears, the familiar sound easily put into a context or tradition one is most familiar with, and that sound that escapes determination. Like the mechanically reproduced record, Mackey's work opens out unto an unknown audience, one that will have been, as the nature of experience is to be found in the

recollection as re-collection, the articulation of one event with another through palimpsestic revision.

Throughout his ongoing serial poem *The Song of the Andoumboulou* there is persistent reference to music, performed or playing on a jukebox. Accompanying shifting spaces (nominally to memorialize the places the dead may have visited), this music mixes the registers of memorialization and aspiration, substituting place for place to emphasize locomotion, and transmission. The name of this series comes from a recording, *Les Dogon* (an ethnic group in Mali), on which an example of the referenced funeral song appears. François Di Dio writes, "The Song of the Andoumboulou is addressed to the spirits. For this reason the initiates, crouching in a circle, sing it in a whisper in the deserted village, and only the howling of dogs and the wind disturb the silence of the night" (cited in *EW* 31). It is, Mackey notes, a funeral song that moves from song to eulogy and back, a lone voice "reciting [the deceased's] genealogy, bestowing praise, listing all the places [the deceased] set foot while alive" Ultimately it marks "the entry of the deceased into the other life... 'the wail of a new-born child into a terrifying world.'" ⁴⁸ Mackey insists on the "forms of graphic inscription in Dogon cosmology, the cosmogonic potency and role of sign, figure, drawing, trace, diagram, outline, image, mark, design, and so on" extending this emphasis to the "strikingly tactile, abraded vocality, the grating 'graphic' tone and timbre of the song of the Andoumboulou itself" (*SA* xi). Writing is "inscribed" in music as much as poetry inscribes or indexes music, the two together to gesture "above where sound leaves off," or beyond the constraints of conventional articulation.

The Andoumboulou themselves, product of an incestuous coupling and emblematic of a broken kinship link, are made to bear a similar "graphicity," being a

⁴⁸ Mackey, *Splay Anthem* (New York: New Directions Books, 2006), ix. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *SA*.

"rough draft of human being," and finally the human in general, displacing "true" or perfected humanity in some unknown future. The terrifying world they are borne into is "our" world, our present encoded in their pasts and future without "our" being related to "them." The specific contours of this would-be perfected humanity are, to my mind, less important than the aspirational quality, the constitutive incompleteness that informs the writing inspired by the Andoumboulou, and the centrality given to song—both the song as artifact and the act of singing. The opening lines of "Song of the Andoumboulou 1" read

The song says the
dead will not
ascend without song.

That because if
we lure them their names get
our throats, the
word sticks. (*EW* 33)

The word sticks, gets stuck in "our throats," or holds itself without coming forward or revealing itself. The name marks a certain refusal of naming or speech. Here, the poem performs a saying without saying, announces, if I can put it this way, a definite silence that, in this context, is a syncope of the "we" that sings to connect itself with its dead. The message issues from the song. However, as other critics have noted, song has an ambiguous relationship to signification. "The song *says*...." What is song's discourse? Does this mean that the lyrics of the song alert those listening that the dead need song to ascend, or that something of the song—perhaps its glyphic structure or graphicity—alerts or "intimates" without speaking, says without "saying"? The

second stanza, goes on to suggest a necessity to this song that sidesteps the (tacit) assent often taken to underpin such communal observances. Song, in Mackey's account, intimates—both indicates through some means and draws near; without it, the word, become threatening, sticks. Song thus becomes an apotropaic performance, guarding against some unruly word that "gets our throats"—taking away the breath, suffocating or disgusting, revealing the contours of community. The stanza itself is a "breathless" sentence, beginning with a relative pronoun but refusing direct subordination, eliding a comma between "them" and "there"; its sense may or may not depend on what the song says. The word that sticks and its relation to "their names" is, as in the epigraph to the poem "something secret," something that readers are "not to know."⁴⁹ The *song* of the Andoumboulou, then, is at once an artifact, a traditional observance that binds participants in a community or culture, and a threat to the identity of that community, the distinction between the living and the dead. It is an observance—"The dead, they say, are dying / of thirst"—with the song being necessary to satisfy them, the part of them that lives on in us, if it is to live on, while threatening always to overflow its bounds: "not even words. / Except it says itself / for days // in your head" (EW 34).

This secret recurs throughout the long poem in such guises as inverted syntax that defers or obscures grammatical subject (e.g., "Weathered raft I saw myself / adrift on") and silences generated by antecedentless "what" (e.g., "Not yet asleep I'm no longer / awake, lie awaiting what / stalks the unanswered air").⁵⁰ Like the ambivalent role of song and the mode of living-on for the dead, secret here suggests a reticence

⁴⁹ Those are the words of "the European" who is inquiring about a point of cosmology that Ogotemmêli refuses to clarify to him, "a Nazarene." See *Conversations with Ogotemmêli* (London: Oxford UP, 1965), 58. Cited in EW, p. 33.

⁵⁰ The antecedentless "what" becomes thematic: the title *Whatsaid Serif* refers to the "what-sayer," who must receive and respond to any story for that story to be told. That function is internalized into the writing in an anticipated moment of reading or audience.

regarding disclosure that in Chapter One I termed "erotic syncope." However, rather than read this secret in light of Mackey's notion of "discrepancy"—drawn again from Dogon origin myths, in this case highlighting an originary, etymological "creaking" or words and highlighting the impossibility of rigorous self-definition for any person or culture—I prefer the more general term μ topian (mu-topian) to thematize poetics, and problems of reading. The μ or *mu-* (also the name of a serial poem since collected with *The Song of the Andoumboulou*) divides itself between the present state of affairs it precedes as condition of possibility, and the anticipated future: it inscribes a certain "post-," a moment *after* that is also the moment *before* and the moment *of*. Mu-topia indicates the "space" of writing's formation, deformation and reformation, the tension between originality and tradition, between the creative act and its context. Through graphic similarity to the English word "utopia," I mean to suggest both the ineluctable graphicity such utopian longing must contend with, and, in writing, motivate. *Mu-* also lends itself to music, both as a node around which an imagined collectivity can condense, and a "liberatory index of possibility" (DE 7). It stands as "a stimulus to an extramusical pursuit of innovative authority," both poetic and political authority, rendering the relationship between poetry and music chiastic: each exposes and supplements the inadequacies of the other (DE 9). As *index* of possibility, music "points to" what *is* or *has been, there*, in that place. What power or disruptive capacity music "has," it has through the figurativity it enables, its retreat rather than its irruptive self-presentation. Music's *potential* power derives from its having already been imbricated in social and semiotic networks, and its openness to re-positioning within other semiotic series or networks. It points to or indicates possibility, but "is" not possibility "as such." From this point of view, it is a sign or "symbol of dissent" precisely because of its indexical function when it is used in other contexts. To the extent that one often associates certain music—as expression of the "experience" of

depravation—with dissent, that habitual association grants music a limited power to effect or express desire for thinking and being otherwise, meaning otherwise than itself both on its own and especially when represented or referenced. It figures in the construction and deconstruction of an articulated whole as any such whole's "outside," or threatening excess. It is in this way that the *mu-* to be discussed in this chapter is the *mu-* of music as much as it is the *mu-* of *mûthos*.

With a recursiveness that is part of the definition, Mackey cites Charles Olson's citation of Jane Harrison's definition of *mûthos* as "a re-utterance or pre-utterance," whose first example "may have been the 'simply the interjectional utterance *mu*'" (SA x). Within and complicating this recursive set of references, he cites an album, *Mu-*, recorded by multi-instrumentalist Don Cherry and percussionist Ed Blackwell, and an Atlantis-like album thought to have disappeared into the Pacific. By extension, *mu-* becomes "[a]ny longingly imagined, mourned or remembered place, time, state, or condition," including, the reference to Don Cherry's album suggests, both empathic ensemble interplay and the "original" performance as "lost states" (SA x). Each of these accounts refers both to some prior event and to some moment of recording or writing. For this reason, one might re-write the "theme of utopic reverie" or "lost ground" as a theme of μ topia, raising the stakes on utopia's placeless place: such is not the impossible ground of sought-for harmony, but constitutively lost, "found" through a labor not reducible to the work of mourning.

Mu-, as what gives rise to mythologies, names an opportunity and an obligation to carry on despite long odds, despite the absence of any final word or work, though this "despite" is also "because of." As a momentary utterance, an interjection, *mu-* opposes itself to the stasis of a full or transcendent signifier as presence or presence-to-itself. It is, the sonic *mu-* of *movement*, including both the movements of the African diaspora and the circulation of texts within its network, and

thus any "cross-cultural exchange," understood as a sentimental and political formation enacted through physical (e.g., travel, exile) and technical migrations (e.g., books, record). For the same reason, *mu-* is also the *mu-* of *multiple*. It marks a temporizing of space, a conditioned thought of an unconditioned future. *Mûthos'* capacity to extend itself into myth must be thought as a mobile capacity that symbolizes myth's capacity for rearticulation, myth's transformation over time in response to changing conditions without collapsing or stilling into reification or myths of permanence. The *μ*topian names possibilities for working with the inadequacy of language, and of thinking, in the present, literature's aspirant call to a world that will have awaited it. Such lacks are instead productive, the very seeds of productivity and imagination, and provide leverage on the fatal closure of any system, including that system we call "reality."

Mackey also ascribes to the poems a "salvag[ing] operation,"⁵¹ such that reference to the Andoumboulou, who both never existed and are all that exists of the human, performs a kind of conjuring work bound up with song's invocation and homage to the dead. However, the conjuring work here seems to be on the model of mechanical reproduction, whose power rests in its ability to wrest sounds and images from their original contexts. Suspending the affective investments one may have in a particular recording, the recording itself is neutral; it stands as a means to reverse or "cut back" to an earlier time without necessarily lending itself to archaeological projects of recovering origins or ruses to effect immortality. From this perspective, the record is not a means through which a performance is preserved and repeated indefinitely within the limits of the storage medium, but rather through the capacities of repetition a store of difference, with each listening being differential listening. The

⁵¹ Nathaniel Mackey, *Paractitical Hinge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 233. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *PH*.

repetition that the record invites, and that serial poetics risk, need not be thought of as a repetition of the same thing but can also, like a record's repeated playing, allow that repetition to be a re-articulation that is the precondition of the new.

"On the edge of an 'it' otherwise / out of reach"

Poetry shares an affinity with the phonograph in another sense: its relation to the senses, especially the auditory senses. The poem inscribes an audiovisual encounter with an anticipated audience, allowing it to move beyond reference, beyond the individual poet's experience or voice. In part, this is because of changes in individual experience. Commenting on flows of information at the end of the twentieth century, Mackey argues that "the individual consciousness is often being impressed or imprinted upon, impinged upon in some cases, by what's going on in various places at various times and at various levels at various times" (*PH* 303). He is specifically referring to world events and the access people have to the presents, and pasts, of other places. We have already seen an example of this mediated interrelation in Mackey's own encounter with the Andoumboulou first by record, and later by books. His metaphors, tellingly, are all related to inscription—the familiar condition of inscribing as one is inscribed in and by other discourses, articulated within and by other articulations. Rather than remaining at the level of poetry's inscription or transmission of information—e.g., its reference to or invocation of other cultures—Mackey underscores its "expression" of sensibility: "there are ways in which that sensibility reaches beyond or at least wants to reach beyond the confinements of the everyday, of the empirically verifiable, the sorts of things that we assume to define in the realm in which relevant events occur" (*PH* 303). To identify a "cross-cultural poetics" as a political and aesthetic project requires that we attend to those aspects of the artwork that exceed or extend its *logos*, to the "limits of the sayable."

Sensibility need not oppose thought or privilege affect as the immediate perception of a some self-conscious being. As Mackey's writing bears out, thinking is bound up with the sensible, aesthetics, where thought is not reducible to cognition. The term "sensibility" also refers to taste, refinement, or pathos, often within a particular community. This other sense remains in play, but the reach "beyond" that Mackey underscores suggests that to follow the paths of thought opened by the former sense will lead to an undoing of the latter sense. Of particular importance, once again, is the phonograph⁵² (or other reproduced sound) as a means of dissemination: throughout his work (and on his own recording) recordings recur, providing an oblique commentary, an oblique warning regarding privileging voice too greatly, since "voice," too, can be other than itself on account of its graphicity, that otherness in the voice that anticipates reproduction. In earlier poems, this graphic quality manifests itself through phonetic doubling ("Dawn so belated I wept, / would've cut its tongues, having been denied/ Erzulie's inmost / aye") or deferral:

Drummed,
I put in, played
upon by hands,
hers,
made a "priest" of...

Faces, run
out by water.

Features waste and reappear.

(*EW* 46, 35, emphasis in original)

⁵² Mackey's own record, *Strick* (*Song of the Andoumboulou* 16-25), featuring Mackey reading with instrumental accompaniment from Royal Hartigan and Hafez Modizradah deserves consideration that extends beyond the scope of the present argument.

In the former example, *aye* sounded in the "inner ear" invokes *eye* and *I*, implying all three. The situation named by this denial is not only refused consent, but refused attention, refused coupling. In the latter, the sound pattern of the lines surrounding "faces" anticipates the word "faeces," which makes more literal sense to have "run out by water," a pun or confusion suggested by objectless "features waste" in the last line. Here, there is an implicit grammatical reflexivity of the language—in the absence of a direct object, the syntax suggests that the features waste *themselves* and reappear. Within the system of reference in the long poem, one might say that the features waste themselves *by* reappearing, or as the mode of their reappearance. The drawing together of waste or faeces and face makes an implicit temporal or historical claim about historical process. "Song of the Andoumboulou 4" begins with an epigraphic reference to powerful stones "said to have been brought by Africa by the slaves, who concealed them in their stomachs by swallowing them." That story, in turn, echoes a story Ogotëmmeli grudgingly tells of the colored stones, taken to be the bones of a man named Lébé, thought to have been left as the excrement of the water spirit Nummo that are actually her ornaments.⁵³ Features "waste" – appear as waste – which is their mode of survival as historical objects, in this case in the (orthographic or phonetic) similarity of semantically unrelated words.

The implicit claim is for an "alternate vocality," an alternate sounding attuned to the surplus signification of language that is the terrain of poetry. As the poem continues, the graphicity of language is marked by a kind of orthographic "declension" centered around pronouns, and, through that play, an engagement with the possibilities of community and narrative:

Arced harp cut from

⁵³ The syncretism Mackey appears to be attempting between this myth and Erzulie, goddess of love in the Haitian vodoun pantheon known for her love of such ornamentation, is beyond the scope of my present argument to work out.

wood
 one night brought up
 what's under.
 Masks
 made of trembling.
 Paint.
 Purgatorial stealth.
 Made of
 its amends an unappeasable
 indulgence.
 Makes of them its
 then,
 of it their
 if.⁵⁴

These lines, structured around another "secret" ("*what's* under"), turn on the multiple valences of the phrase "made of"—invoking again the re-use of that which might be the waste or excess of some other process—and the structure of the if/then proposition. The effects of this latter, staged in the last four lines cited, implicate at once conventions of writing and spelling, and fundamental philosophical or metaphysical presumptions expressed by its grammar. Since English lacks a conditional tense or mood, one ordinarily uses the conjunction "if" in the indicative mood to introduce a conditional clause, usually in the present or present continuous tense, where one assumes the truth of an event that has not yet happened. A second

⁵⁴ Mackey, *School of Udhra* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993), 29. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text as *SU*. This poem is of the "mu" series.

clause, often but not necessarily beginning with "then" typically answers the conditional clause, stipulating that at such time as the event of the conditional clause comes to be, something else will result.⁵⁵ Logically, if/then propositions presume the truth of both clauses, putting the latter in a contingent or (temporally) dependent relation to the former, annexing temporality as a problem by making it merely internal to whatever appears. "If," in other words, introduces a *calculation of possibility*, of conditions of possibility for some future action within a grammatically conceived cause-and-effect relationship, those things that can happen in the world as it is given, as a condition of its givenness. For this reason, if/then propositions are directly implicated in epistemology, that set of foundational assumptions for thinking that determine, for example, what is excess or waste, and what is central.

In the poem, an unspecified agency (syntactically "arced harp") makes of "them" a "then," at once temporalizing and making conditional a (human or other) collectivity that the object pronoun "them" would replace grammatically. Simultaneously, the poem draws attention to the fundamentally grammatical nature of propositions or declarations of belonging, the contingent, lag-behind nature of collectivities, which may not be known, or known to themselves, in the moment of their constitution. At another level, this moment marks a moment of the "birth" of narrative, if not song—constitutively *in medias res*: the arced harp makes "them" a formative feature of *its* past: its then. The transition from "it" to "if" reverses the if/then proposition, the grammatical foundation of cause and effect, to a temporally unclear "then/if," which can only make sense as part of a series of contingencies: *Then, if... if... and if....* "Being" becomes a product—made of—temporality, not vice

⁵⁵ It makes no difference for my argument here that the subjunctive mood has a nearly identical grammar (e.g., *if it were/had been raining*, [*then*] I would/would have brought my umbrella), since the grammatical presuppositions remain fundamentally unchanged. The subjunctive mood draws upon a similar calculation of possibility, which is at issue here.

versa. Rather than one thing (I bring my umbrella) happening as a result of another (it rains), the inversion here suggests that being—as object or subject, *them* or *it*—initiates a series of contingencies, that only masquerade as certainties. Causality, of course, is not abolished by this inversion. On the contrary, chance is affirmed. In both instances, the transition arced harp effects through what it has "brought up"—either unearthed or mentioned—requires only that a single letter be changed to alter the sense of the lines. In both cases, the letter changes to another either ordinally or morphologically proximate: *m* to *n*, *t* to *f*.⁵⁶ These two transformations—one word "made of" or into another—mark the structure of the conditional by illustrating the insubstantial nature of distinctions presumed to be solid. The invocation of music's transformative or generative capacities, its ambivalent position within linguistic semiotic systems and adjacent to those systems makes temporality of the Andoumboulou, at once prior to the humans that "we are" and contemporaneous with "us" to the point of indifference a feature of the writing itself. Poetry, that is, borrows music's capacity to confront and thwart the pull of grammar to "say" the unsayable.

This "unsayable" itself is made a theme by repetitions throughout the work, pushing language not beyond itself, but further into itself, into its own materiality. One example involves the word "loquat," the fruit of the loquat tree, but also the third-person present subjunctive conjugation of the Latin *loquere*, to speak:

Loquat exuberance
got the best of them, loquat
eloquence, loquat allure.

(WS 69)

⁵⁶ Here, it is worth recalling that the name of Mackey's third volume, containing *Song of the Andoumboulou* 16-35, is *Whatsaid Serif*, invoking both the collaborative nature of storytelling practices and typography, with "seraph" hovering sonically along the edges.

Though I would emphasize the rhythmic and phonetic qualities of this of this repetition as crucial to the work of the play, repetition does not make the words "meaningless," but instead underscores the meaningfulness of language's sensuousness, its eloquent sensibility or fugitive articulacy beyond the immediate meaning of the words. This sensuousness—the sound and look of the word—anticipates a later moment of fraught etymology:

Anomalous bed they
called "loquacious," melodious
word whose root they mistook,
took
to mean loquat-sweet...

(WS 69, Mackey's ellipsis).

These lines establish an aporia or point of indistinction between "loquat" in English, which derives the term from transliterated Cantonese, and "loquat" in Latin, which is indirectly related to "loquacious" after all. "Root," like the repeated "took," draws attention to the histories of contact and conquest that have shaped English's development. Simultaneously, the connection to the present subjunctive mood returns us to the if/then proposition discussed above, insofar as the present subjunctive of "to speak" resembles the conditional: e.g., "whether s/he speak or not..." or "I recommend that s/he not speak." Unlike the grammatical structure of the conditional, which treats time in terms of simple cause and effect, the subjunctive mood indicates states not thought to exist. As "took" is related to "mistook" whether we recognize a commonality or not, so the two senses of loquat are bound to one another by a third language that has, so to speak, consumed them both, without being able to reduce one to the other. Indeed, as the poem seems to suggest, the confusion of the two, brought

out by their common spelling and pronunciation, is a condition of possibility and impossibility for language.

Within the long poem, the speculative (and refused) relation of the fruit to speech occurs earlier through direct citation:

[...] "What does 'Language
is a fruit of which the
skin
is called chatter' mean?" (WS 19).⁵⁷

This chatter, another name for which is speculation, that necessary attempt to think beyond present conditions, that chanced relation poetry risks and enacts is a necessary precondition, here drawing out the surprising correspondence between two words that, though unrelated, poetry relates through homophony and orthography, revealing a "fruitful" arbitrariness in signification, and the site-specific bounds of any locution. The interrogation of "root," which also must be read two ways, like the proliferation of anagrams⁵⁸ throughout the poem, emphasizes the capacities of language users to more or less arbitrarily redefine or refashion words to suit their needs, to articulate what "conventionally articulate speech" leaves unsayable. Better, such play emphasizes the multiple, simultaneous bases on which language is constituted, the material base in the supposed message. Rather than emphasizing language as power, then, language's *use* is underscored, alongside an implicit claim for poetry as a process of tapping

⁵⁷ The phrase is Cerno Bokar's, a West African Sufi teacher, who, according to Louise Brenner, strived in his teachings to "move 'beyond the letter' of the written word." The citation in full: "Language is a fruit of which the skin is called chatter, the flesh eloquence, and the seed good sense. Those whose profession it is to flatter the masses [i.e., the griots or praise singer-musicians] know the uses of all these parts, and they employ them in a marvelous fashion." See Louise Brenner, *West African Sufi: The Religious Heritage and Spiritual Search of Cerno Bokar Saalif Taal* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 179.

⁵⁸ Examples of these include "That" (ahtt, ttha), "Star" (tsar, rast, rats), and , nearly, "alterably": "Holding air he was / holding the world, he intimated, / lolled his tongue, trailed / off into singing, Lebert / Aaly / the name he now took..." (WS 79). That name derives from an Art Ensemble of Chicago composition dedicated to Albert Ayler, for whose unspoken name "Lebert Aaly" is a near anagram.

language's *potential*. This poetry invites us, that is, not to think about what words mean but to look at *how* they mean, and how they might mean otherwise.

The Song of the Andoumboulou, chronicling the journey of its eponymous subjects to reach the surface of the earth, stretches between past and present, engaging a question about the relation of one to the other. In different terms, past and present are put in a differential relation to one another through a shifting referential terrain charting movement from and between sites (mythic and otherwise), temporal moments through the intrusion of songs "on the box" of the poem's locations, and through the pronominal shifts I have been discussing. That sites become more specific—"The same cry taken / up in Cairo, Córdoba, / north / Red Sea near Nagfa, Muharraq"—seems compensatory for the unstable identities of the actors effected by the mixed points of view. The "voice" of the poem emerges in first or third person, singular or plural, often in a self-interrogative tone that locates the "identity" of the poem's speaker(s) outside of the presumptions of language, or speaking, of identity. As with epic poetry, there is a quest to found a nation—to recover "lost ground"⁵⁹—although, as reference to established territories attests, this founding will necessarily be a re-founding or re-inscription of space: "each the / other's non-pronominal elsewhere / nominal / out" (WS 59). Along these lines, transitions between places in *Song* are typically merely nominal, containing an implicit deictic: "It was a train / in southern Spain we / were on," "it was a train outside São Paulo on our way to Algeciras we were one," "a / train gotten on in Miami" (WS 30-31). Unlike epic, these poems do not establish home or nation, but instead continue moving toward "some ecstatic elsewhere." This is *μ*topia—that trace of the here-and-now immanent to founded

⁵⁹ In the preface to *Splay Anthem*, Mackey writes about "Mu" that it "carries a theme of utopic reverie, a theme of lost ground and elegiac allure" and goes on to write that the "places named in the song of the Andoumboulou, set foot on by the deceased while alive but lost or taken away by death, could be called "Mu" (x). In terms of my argument, though the tone of the reverie may be utopic, the movement of the writing, as writing, is *μ*topic.

nation as much as lost ground. In its singularity, utopian "site" is not available for myths of founding or re-founding. It marks the trace of irreducible otherness that such myths of origin or emergence suppress. The "outside" sought can only be a "nominal out," a so-called "out" that poetry in particular, but literature more generally asymptotically approaches through its poetics, which extend beyond themselves toward a potential future.

The status of the Andoumboulou, cast in the unlikely role of quasi-epic heroes, thematizes the location of this "exterior" as interior to some other system or structure (i.e., the Earth), in much the same way that "lost ground" is not lost to all, or lost in the same way. Coupled with the shifts of pronouns, the use of deixis to mark their timeless sojourn, both in the form of geographic sites and irruptive "cuts on the box" shifts the emphasis away from ipseity—the personal identity or being upon which literature is often presumed to be based, the being it is presumed to express—toward hæcceity, or here-and-nowness. Emphasizing the orphic potentialities of song, especially its generative ecstasy (its literally coming from another place), one can either have song's power, or the resistance it is supposed to express. Music's orphic potential is the condition of identity's impossibility: ipseity is always "deferred," or "reft" (SA 15, 55). As with the record itself, *Song* seems concerned with the dissemination of singularity as that which is not caught in considerations of selfhood, "selfness" or identity. Such selfhood in writing, insofar as it relies on a grammatical structure of pronominal substitution (and tendencies of reading, as discussed in the previous chapter), becomes iterable. The emphasis on pronouns and the breaks of and within pronominal substitution implicates the metonymic substitutions of any articulated unit: "Uninevitable they, / however much it seemed otherwise" (WS 20). Lost, utopic ground is "remnant of an alternate / life," an echo of a potential world opposing the merely possible, the trace of what is not made present in recollection.

Music in *Song* becomes the privileged locus for the organizing/disorganizing, gathering/dispersing movement of the μ topic, the aspirant call whose tone is bent blue by unfulfilled longing for response, unfulfilled longing for some not yet realized collectivity's answer.

Phantom Objectivity and Objective Hauntings

Neither the "here" nor "now" of hæcceity is uncomplicated in Mackey's work. Both prove to be self-differential, often, as with pronouns, through the problems of self-reference. In his writing about poetics, and in the concepts produced or invoked in his writing—particularly such notions as *duende* (in García Lorca's formulation), metavoice, ahttlessness (anagrammatic "thatlessness"), ythm (anagrammatic "myth" or (rh)ythm) and the andoumboulouous in *Song*, post-expectancy and the cut in *From a Broken Perfume Bottle Traces Still Emanate* (which grows out of *Song*)—the sensibility writing reaches after is marked by a constitutive incompleteness or active un-completing, a suspicion of the givenness of any moment or utterance. These concepts or notions—inflections of the μ topian—share an attention to what is immanent, though not necessarily present, to language—to what is "underneath" or "beyond" language while still, in a sense, "belonging to" it. Partially at stake in the insistence on sound recording and performance practices related to sound technology, particularly in the serial novel, is the temporal rift phonography dramatically stages between source and audience, and the kinds of attendant practices—for performer and audience—that can emerge with the possibility of repeating an experience of listening. The record serves both as a touchstone for the work (*Song*'s "another cut came on the box," the arguments staged via particular recordings and the exchange of records and cassettes in *From a Broken Bottle, Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, considered presently) and as an implicit, internal challenge to notions of poetry, in the broadest

sense, as a simple "expression" or "transmission" of "personal experience." As personal experience is both informed and changed by encounters with others, through the influx of information (including the ideological formations that yield "personal experience" as a meaningful concept) sound reproduction enables and participates in, a poetics marked by contact with the record raises the question what encounter is made available in the poem, that is, what the poem *does* express if not experience.

For poetics, of course, the question is not the expression of experience but the struggles towards such expression, the ways in which poetry stages an estranging encounter with language, and what Walter Benjamin referred to as language's "impartibility" [Mitteilbarkeit]. Among other things, poetry is the encounter with language as medium, its participation with the "outside" or edges of its own exteriority. Discussing his title *Eroding Witness*, Mackey describes such tarrying with language's outside as bringing "writing or language as witnessing into a kind of complication that can appear to be erosive, that can appear to be pulling the ground or the foundation out from under what we normally expect in the speech acts and the writing acts that we encounter" (PH 309). This *apparent* erosivity points to the limits of expression, the participation with language's supposed "outside," or what is deemed inexpressible *within certain limits*, which are treated as if "internal" to language's functioning because they are integral to what can be made sensible at a given time. If music serves as an index of liberatory potentiality that informs poetry and provides a supplemental sense of (political and aesthetic) authority, the poem in its turn would be an index of the struggle of language after what it cannot (yet) say, both nothingness and the not-yet. Music, understood as fugitive articulacy, is no mere index; it is a principle of poetics, a graph of "words meaning / more / than the world they / pointed at," or writing's disruption of "natural" or given totalities (WS 22).

Fugitive articulacy, those moments of language's self-supercession, suggests one "eccentric out"—a courting of the expressionless, a saying of the impossible. In *Song*, the means include a complex network of references, especially musical references, and a shifting collective-individual "voice" that splits the poem between epic and lyric, suggesting that lyric perspective relies upon a suppressed epic or mythic foundation, which serial form defers. In his related serial novel, *From a Broken Perfume Bottle Traces Still Emanate*, such articulacy is considered in more explicitly musical terms and impartibility thematized through the epistolary form, written by "N." to an interlocutrix addressed as "Angel of Dust." There, characters share dreams or divine visitations, and suffer vertiginous "cowrie shell attacks" that stall the novel's progress. In this novel, to which this chapter now turns, music is less supplement—an alternative expression that picks up where language leaves off: "Words / don't go there, they said, / no sooner said than they were / there, albeit there defied location..." (WS 91).⁶⁰ Any possible "expression" must orient itself spatially between two sites, which may be infinitesimally proximate, and temporally between two moments. Expression, that is, takes place within the limits of deixis, a there that always will have "defied location": "No 'it / was' could be made of it, pure / dispatch" (SA 79). The epistolary form, particularly in this novel, makes both narration's lagging behind the event and the struggle with/against deixis into themes, simultaneously questioning the status of the "correspondence" between the text of the narration and the event itself. This "there," a "'space' we're all immigrants from," is a null space or utopia available only as a retrospective figuration, "resonance rather than resolution" as N. puts it later. This "space," in other words, is a vertiginous, negative space (not to

⁶⁰ The phrase "words don't go there" is often attributed to saxophonist Charles Lloyd as his response to an interviewer who requested that he comment on piece of his music. In this poem and prose co-authored with Art Lange Mackey declares that "Writers influenced by jazz have been variously rising to the challenge of proving him wrong." See *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* eds. Mackey and Lange (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993), ii.

be confused with the concept of the same name from graphic design), a space of non-happening: a caesura or syncope. It is a pivot point from which many lines of flight can be drawn, and re-drawn, but it is not a timeless *there* awaiting determination.

N.'s first letter to Angel of Dust, copied to Jack Spicer, García Lorca and H-mu, is "Song of the Andoumboulou 6." This prose poem reads as a statement of Mackey's poetics, making a case for "*absence* as unavoidably an inherence in the texture of things (dreamseed, habitual cloth)" (EW 50). However, more than the difference in the signatory, a moment of deixis complicates such a straightforward reading: "I see things *in your world* as *solid* in a way my 'myriad words' can't even hope to be. [...] Only an other (possibly Other) sort of solidarity, as if its very underseams—or to be more exact, those of its advent—sprouted hoofs" (EW 50, only "solid" italicized in original). The author of this letter, identified as N., locates himself in another world, identifies as possible Other, and contrasts Angel of Dust's "solid" world with his own, which he insists is not "insubstantial, unreal or whatever else." This prepositional location inscribes the difference, again, between a poetics concerned with ipseity and one concerned with hæcceity, marking a similar distinction between a cross-cultural *identity* and a cross-cultural *poetics*, between experience *in* the text and experience *of* the text. Another letter follows in the third section of "Song of the Andoumboulou 7," where N. describes "last night's poem (which I have yet to write)" and to insist on the need for a "cut somewhere" as a precondition for "relational coherence," inscribing a relation between "them" and "then," as we have already seen.

Early in *Bedouin Hornbook*, the first novel of the *Perfume Bottle* series, (which similarly begins with a reference to writing that has not or will not happen—"I'm not at all sure this won't be the last letter you'll receive from me"), the "cut" becomes a specifically temporal concept related to reggae, and epistolary form's relation to

"relational coherence."⁶¹ Apologizing for returning to "business we've been over before," N. writes of

the cricketlike chirp one gets from the guitar in most reggae bands as the echoic spectre of a sexual "cut" (sexed/unsexed, seeded/unsown, etc.)—"ineffable glints or vaguely audible grunts of unavoidable alarm." (*BH* 38)

Responding to apparent objection ("You got me all wrong on what I meant by "a sexual 'cut'"), N. goes on to clarify that he does not have in mind "'a thinly veiled romance of distantiation'":

I put the word "cut," remember, in quotes. What I was trying to get at was simply the feeling I've gotten from the characteristic, almost clucking beat one hears in reggae, where the syncopation comes down like a blade, a "broken connection. Here I put the word "broken" in quotes to get across the point that the pathos one can't help hearing in that claim mingles with a retreating sense of peril, as though danger itself were beaten back by the boldness, however "broken," of its call to connection. (*BH* 42)

This response, which in the supposed time of writing amounts to an anticipation, an aspirant "claim to connection," seems to be drawing on one-drop reggae where listeners (and band members) may perceive the same song as having two different tempi. This structural aporia means, for example, that one could justify transcribing the music in two different time signatures, or dance in two different ways, but this

⁶¹ *Bedouin Hornbook* (San Francisco: Sun and Moon Classics, 1997 [1986]), 9. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *BH*.

choice will have depended upon imposing a structure, closing an open form. The openness, however, means that the "originating" instance is not singular, but endlessly differed/deferred: there is an insistent "previousness evading each and every natal occasion," an insistent both/and rather than an either/or.

N. terms the cut "sexual" because

the word "he" and the word "she" rummage about in the crypt each defines for the other, reconvening as whispers at the chromosome level as though the crypt had been a crib, a lulling mask, all along. In short, it's the apocalypse I'm talking about, not courtship. (BH 42-43, my italics)

In this account, the moment of (insistently grammatical and textual) identity's birth is also death. "Abort" and "origin" share an etymological root, made conceptual here insofar as the articulation of an origin or singularity of being ("he" or "she") relates to the desire to subvert "relational coherence" in favor of a singular (given) narrative. As in the previous chapter, what is at issue is an erotic syncope, the "broken" or refused connection upon which narrativity depends, the empty site of articulation that, analogy to reggae suggests, is a matter of perception, of superimposing closure onto an essentially open set. All of this, of course, continues similar considerations discussed above, although in a specifically narrative, prosaic form, extending these observations to literature more generally. In addition, the epistolary form dramatizes the scene and medium of writing, the relays and negotiations entailed in sense-making. Specifically, letters signed N. install a double signature, opening the question of the relationship between the author, Mackey, whose name appears on the title pages of the books of this series and who speaks in the name of the other, N., whose name appears at the end of most of the letters throughout the series as a counter-signatory. One is invited to

consider the relation between the two "authors," the structure of which suggests a cycle of masks or avatars, a cycle of misadventures, or wrong turns; in a word, one is invited to conceive of them in a *serial* relationship, a series whose temporal boundaries are questioned (a questioning staged within the text by the first letter). The term "avatar" highlights N.'s semi-autonomous position vis-à-vis Mackey, accents both the concept's religious sense—the descent of a deity to earth in an incarnate, fleshly form—and its contemporary, everyday sense—that which stands in for or represents the (transcendental, infinite) self in some other form. The avatar, in other words, is virtual, representative of, but not reducible to some originary entity.

Mackey has explained that in creating N. he was "invoking a certain audience, a rather spectral audience" to mitigate the severe "sense of isolation" in which Mackey felt himself to be working (*PH* 298). Such isolation, implied by the epistolary form and figured throughout the novels in the form of audience demands and expectations, the negotiations of tradition, and especially the anonymity of the audience who encounters the band primarily via their record, *Orphic Bend*, might be usefully understood through recourse to the spectrality Mackey invokes. Any audience, as ideal readership, exists only spectrally, as that absent or deferred "body" whose responses are partially anticipated or at least awaited, a revenant body whose fit with any present audience is inherently imperfect. The audience participates in that "*absence* [that is] unavoidably an inherence in the texture of things" (*EW* 50). The central conflict, subtending all event and argument, proves to be a concern over origin, the origins of origin, what N. calls "Supreme Friction" whose unbending invokes a desire to "misconceive or miscarry, to want to be done with any relational coherence, to want to abort" (*EW* 54).

N., then, is a gnostic remainder carried over from another text and the reminder of another, alternative beginning, the invented sense of the past. The opening letter of

Bedouin Hornbook, dated 14 June 1978, thematizes the narrative's uncertain origin, its own fraught and difficult birth. N. writes of a dream he has had in which he comes upon an open manhole around which lays an assortment of plumbing fixtures he understands to be a disassembled bass clarinet. Intuiting that the "crowd"—a spectral pressure—wants to hear him play John Coltrane's "Naima," he finds himself playing the version of Coltrane's "Cousin Mary" recorded by Archie Shepp on *Four for Trane*. He throws in "a few licks of [his] own" before "coming to the realization that what [he] was playing existed on a record," the vinyl's scratches audible "somewhere in back and to the left" of him (*BH* 7). His own performance, including his own supplemental licks, are pre-inscribed on a record, which in the dream serves as a disruption of the performer's identity in favor of emphasizing the performance's iterability.⁶² In addition to the stereophonic specificity of this account, which I will address toward the end of this chapter, this opening scene also dramatizes very clearly the question of expression or impartibility, extending those through considerations of performance and a newly problematized "originality." Though N. throws in "a few licks," the solo's "proper" signatory remains Archie Shepp, meaning those familiar with *Four for Trane* would recognize it, even if initially that recognition might take the form of a teasing familiarity, a "repetition" simultaneously masked and enhanced by being "infinitely more gruffly resonant and varied and warm" (*BH* 7).

This beginning, after the first beginning in the sixth poem of a series, promises an end—"please don't expect anything more from me in the way of words"—that does not arrive, after having figured a dream of an original performance that turns out not to be original. What kind of "birth" or "origin" is this? What are we to make of this

⁶² Both "Naima," dedicated to Coltrane's wife at the time, and "Cousin Mary," dedicated to a cousin, were initially released on Coltrane's *Giant Steps* album which, as Lewis Porter points out, contains several such dedications, including one to band mate Paul Chambers ("Mr. P.C.") and a stepdaughter ("Syeeda's Song Flute"). See *John Coltrane: His Life and His Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 156.

series, from one world and one book to another, which continues after its proffered end, seemingly, like the *Song of the Andoumboulou*, on condition of an end, or death that must retrace the steps and genealogy of the dead? Emphasizing the retracing rather than the iteration of cultural norms or dispositions, the several deferred beginnings (and endings) of *Perfume Bottle* underscore the negotiations between those marks left behind—e.g., tradition, previous occasions—and progression in the present moment, which can never fully dislodge itself from that past which is the condition of possibility for the present. As the analysis of the cut suggests, however, that past itself is not a simple origin: other possible perspectives that one can imaginatively re-engage or re-activate haunt the articulated past. Such openness to that haunting co-presence—at the expense of a secured identity—may go toward explaining the ludic allusiveness, which cites both prior texts and albums as "origins." The past emerges as that in and against the flow of time, a rhythmic structure that turns in and against itself "in the way of words."

Formally, this vertiginous plane of the text is gestured toward through allusions to philosophers, anthropologists and musicians, through the recurrent, incapacitating visitations from elsewhere (the "scattered cowrie shell attacks"), and through the after-the-fact lectures/libretti, which tend to correspond obliquely with events in the lives of the band members, producing a sense that "there's no 'really' when it comes to 'was,'" that "I wasn't really there, that the 'I' which was was an 'I' which wasn't my own."⁶³ The first such visitation occurs during a heat wave—taking form of a strange coincidence for Penguin and what seems like possession for Djamilaa, who begins to rant about the "enemies of Ra" in the band, which, upon realizing that it is the "hour of God" and the hour Coltrane died, generates a wave of

⁶³ The context that gives rise to these observations is N.'s reflection on the use of "alienate" as a verb to describe the dispossession of Kenyan peoples by the English, giving historical specificity to the concern over words' part of speech, underscoring the performativity of words.

dizziness in N. Upon the spell's subsiding, the phrase "phantom objectivity" haunts N.: "It refers to a situation, if I've got it right, where we find ourselves haunted by what we ourselves initiate" (*BH* 88). His discussion of the relationship of (musical) form to conformity and thus to fatalism, a situation "so pat as to become oppressive," directly invokes Lukács, for whom "phantom objectivity" refers to "an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its [the commodity structure's] fundamental nature: the relation between people."⁶⁴ Mackey, in another context, describes phantom objectivity as the effects of the "the veil by which the social order renders its role in the construction of reality invisible" (*DE* 235). Phantom objectivity effectively erases traces of its mediation of "reality," and is thus aligned with the phantom of "phantom limb," to the extent that in both cases "phantom" is a "relative, relativizing term that cuts both ways, occasioning a shift in perspective between real and unreal, an exchange of attributes between the two" (*DE* 236). Invocations of the category of experience, understood this way, must be taken with a proverbial grain of salt. Whatever poetry might "say" about experience, on whatever frequency, is always already in advance of itself, haunted, as in the opening recounted dream, by the conditions of its intelligibility, the conditions of any speech or thought, even as poetry attempts to transcend or un-limit thought.

Thus, encounters such as the scattered cowrie shell attacks (and it is not accidental cowrie shells are used in western Africa as both currency and missiles) are not, or not simply re-visitations of other times, remembrances of otherwise lost or forgotten moments; they are not events at all, but rather, again, the suspension of event, syncope. Within the novels, they occur with increasing regularity, serving as a

⁶⁴ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1971), 83. Lukács goes on to suggest that commodity exchange and its social forms greatly influence the "total inner and outer life of society," meaning that, using N.'s language, the commodity system has a quantum-qualitative effect to the extent that its presence in a given society is total. The eccentric "out" N. seeks, therefore, must be a correspondingly quantum-qualitative out, i.e., a strategy.

dramatic wedge, and an alternate narrative timeline that, like the libretti, provides a separate set of characters and possible events. The first such moment, here a broken-glass attack rather than a broken cowrie shell attack, occurs in *Bedouin Hornbook* after N. finally manages to orchestrate an encounter with the Crossroads Choir, an "anonymous, axiomatic band whose existence had always been taken for granted," known primarily through rumor, encountered in secrecy (*BH* 111). They play at a scene of uncertain characteristics: "[o]ne moment it seemed like a cathedral, the next a storefront church. The possibilities seemed to go on without end" (*BH* 112). The crowd, as in the opening dream, is anonymous, "composed of hairless, mannikinlike men and women, each of whose faces wore itself like a tight tautological mask," a parody of presence (*BH* 112). During a flute player's solo, after the latter's recourse to speech ("As for me," he muttered, 'who am neither I nor not-I, I have strayed from myself and I find no remedy but despair') leads the audience into bacchant-like frenzy, "inventing" call and response where there had been none, "numerous bits of broken glass imbedded themselves in [N.'s] forehead, each of them the seed of a low, breathy growl which seemed to emanate from the stars" (*BH* 115). Simultaneously "heavensent" and evocative of a past trauma (a car accident), the attack spurs thought of the necessary pre-conditions to "free the future from every flat, formulaic 'outcome,' from its own investment in the contested shape of an otherness disfigured by its excursion thru the world." The attack spurs the imagination of a future on conditions other than those made available as repetitions of the "objective" present. However, this "space" (N. refers to it as "the sweet, sour, somewhat acidic hollow in which what was spoken belied the mootness of what might better have been intoned") cannot be taken as an unproblematic "good." *Mûthos* is a destructive capacity, a "vacated

premise" that will have been known, "an image of change I thought I'd one day grasp" (*BH* 119).⁶⁵

The onset of each subsequent cowrie shell attack is accompanied by music, a particular performance from a particular record. The following letter finds N. laid up in bed suffering from what "feel more like shattered cowrie shells...tightfisted imprints, fossil imprints" accompanied by a feeling of dizziness and Ornette Coleman's version of George and Ira Gershwin's "Embraceable You" "piped into [his] head like *subcoritcal* muzak" (*BH* 125). He describes them as an "inverse gravity in which [he's] cut loose from every anchoring assumption...a radical, uprooting vertigo, a rash, an evaporative aspect of [him]self" (*BH* 125, my emphasis). His hospitalization lasts about six months (the entire narrative to date ranges from 14 June 1978 to 5 September 1983) and represents an arrestation in a narrative already prone to small developments and dilations of time. The spell, which doctors cannot pathologize, is broken when members of the band visit N. and, silently, "play" (producing no sound on their respective instruments), a pantomimed performance of varying tempos (described by analogy to phonographic playback—33, 45 and 78 RPM) that proves to be "an inoculation in the clearest, most radical sense of the term" (*BH* 137). Most senses of "inoculation" refer to the introduction of the germs, especially of a disease, into the body through a wound. The *OED* lists two other meanings: one that involves "imbuing a person with feelings, opinions, etc.," a graft of sentiment, and an older sense, referring to the junction where the parts of two plants become continuous, a graft in the literal, horticultural sense. Read in this way, this is the moment of the band's crystallization into a quasi-organic ensemble, while formally

⁶⁵ This episode also marks the first instance in *Perfume Bottle* of the "word balloons" that accompany many of the band's performances and record, which I will address below.

crystallizing the disparate threads and concerns of the novel, the disparate times of practice as preparation and practice as activity, into a fragile unity.

Almost immediately, Lambert expresses his desire to add a new member to their ensemble through the medium of a composition, "Prometheus." His introduction of the composition references an unsigned quotation that gives an added dimension to the cowrie shell attacks: "'To articulate the past historically,' he [Lambert] said, 'means to seize hold of a memory when it flashes up at a moment of danger. This danger affects both the content of a tradition and its receivers: that of becoming a tool of the ruling classes'" (*BH* 146). The citation is, of course, the sixth thesis of Walter Benjamin's "On the Philosophy of History," opposing historical materialism to Leopold von Ranke's view of historiography that would represent the past "as it really was," which is precisely the condition of the future being thinkable only as the fateful outcome of that articulated past "as it was."⁶⁶ The formal juxtaposition of this citation with the reconsiderations of kinship that inform *Perfume Bottle* and the first cowrie shell attack suggests that attacks are not on the order of Proust's *memoire involuntaire*, but rather that the vertigo is that of a forceful, though involuntary, critical reorientation or re-constellation of memory as a spectral substrate to things "as they are." As moments that bring N. face to face with the possibility of non-being, unrestrained utopia, they spur the thought of things that might have been, and thus the awareness that things can always be and have been otherwise. In this way, they are an answer the problem the novel (and Mackey's poetics more generally) pose regarding the relationship to loss as originary, inevitable and inevitably mourned, with or without specific historical or biographical occasion. The aim is neither to seek an external object to internalize as the completion of the self, nor to find "resistant material" in an

⁶⁶ Walter Benjamin, "On the Philosophy of History" trans Harry Zohn in *Selected Writings, Vol. 4 1938-1940*, eds. Eiland and Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). Hereafter cited as *SW4*.

authentic past.⁶⁷ Instead, both of those "lacks" are located *within* the ontological and ideological structures that give rise to them, demanding the impossible imagination of an ecstatic 'out,' figured as an involuntary out, with that which is excluded in the expression of a "self." Radically, then, the cowrie shell attacks figure the syncope of the self, the exposure of time as "double-jointed," the multiplicity of any moment referenced above with respect to the musical measure, to a co-existence or relation that cannot be discussed in causal terms (*DBR* 97).⁶⁸

In its most radical, threatening form, these attacks culminate in the introduction of N.'s own avatar, Natty Dredj (shortened to "Dredj"—the name referencing a Bob Marley composition and a key figure in Rastafarian mythology representing a tear in the self), who writes dateless letters to the Angel of Dust in *Bass Cathedral*, the fourth book in the series. The dateless letters, the first of which evokes the hot Santa Ana winds that occasion Djamilaa's spells, explicitly reference a being "outside of time," which is to say a non-being, being that is not yet or is no longer. This datelessness corresponds to a flux in the signatory, "namelessness inversely related to his recent graduation beyond initial constraint" (*BC* 45).⁶⁹ The new signature, making literal the utopic dissolution of self the cowrie shell attacks imply, fundamentally changes N.'s already fractious relationship with the Angel of Dust (who, in writing the liner notes for their album, speaks for the band). Within the terms of the novel, this newest speaking-for literalizes the ongoing concern of speaking with the voice of another, linked with the metavoice or "voice" from elsewhere, which remains among the novel's central concerns from the opening letter, previously discussed. That the

⁶⁷ Like Adorno and Horkheimer, however, N. also critiques what he calls "middlebrow American tastes, middle-of-the-road aesthetics," which are more or less congruent with what the former call "the style of the culture industry."

⁶⁸ *Djbot Baghostus's Run* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1993), 97. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DBR*.

⁶⁹ *Bass Cathedral* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp, 2008), 45. Henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *BC*.

cowrie shells are shattered suggests that this play of avatars is not reducible to the currency they might otherwise invoke; this is not a mere exchange of equivalents or phantom self-generation, which is not the same as saying they are strictly aneconomic. The attacks are often triggered by public deaths—Bob Marley's and Thelonious Monk's for example⁷⁰—further intimating the attacks with death as a limit of the thinkable, a particular form of non-being the text can only respond to with vertigo. In the broader context of Mackey's writing, in the novel and in the "Song of the Andoumboulou," the aleatory cowrie shell attacks advance a link between creative work, poetry, and death or the dead, those specific dead whom one claims as one's ancestors, one's personal dead, who "will not/ ascend without song" (EW 33). To understand such death, we must think beyond reductive notions of ancestry or kinship; death, never absent, is a particular kind of temporal concern relating to those things passing out of being, the "irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any moment that does not recognize itself as intended in that image" (SW4 391).

The shattered cowrie shell attacks raise the question of "redeeming" the dead or otherwise past, a redemption whose status is always fraught. To the extent that cowrie shells function as currency, their shattering defers economic connotations—both monetary and theological—suggesting an attempt to subvert the tragic heroism or flattening identity at the root of common notions of redemption, especially the messianic sacrifice or "exchange" of one for many. On the model of Benjamin's materialist history, we might think of these attacks as a form of anarchic thinking, "not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest [*stillstellung*] as well" (SW4 396). The shattered cowrie shell attacks' temporal (dialectical) standstill suggest less the "'laws' for the course of historical events," but, the communicability of another time that

⁷⁰ This latter attack afflicts Penguin, whose disappearance and reappearance spark the central concern of this book, the appearance of comic word bubbles during performances, the second instance of such bubbles appearing during performances in the novel, the first time they become news.

coexists, unredeemed, with this articulated now, the irruption of a past moment awaiting its moment of recognizability. These episodes of temporal arrest or stilling, often triggered by death, differ from individual melancholia and public mourning, untamed by a "common denominator" or singular signifier (i.e., "culture," "diaspora," "revolution"), not curable by a substitute object (*SW4* 403).

The problem, of course, is that one cannot live, or imagine living, in this undefined state at the cusp of non-being. This is why I have preferred the term μ topia, the multiple utopia, the momentary availability of possibilities thought passed. Being aleatory, the cowrie shell attacks also represent a play on notions of accessibility, the idea that one directs one's work or actions toward a certain, fixed class or racial audience who immediately recognize themselves as the intended audience and further recognize their own predicament and are spurred to revolutionary action. μ -topia understands loss as an aperture, like the open moment through which a messiah might enter. If there is a messianism in μ topia's aperture, it must be thought as a messianism without messiah, opposed to the kairological Event that would be the end of history or the resolution of all contradictions. There is no unique moment most propitious to action, and beside such a moment could only irrupt as Event, potentially unrecognized, nameable only after it has "passed." There can have been such an Event, however as a moment posited, an imaginary new origin or starting over. As much as they suggest a "revolutionary chance," the cowrie shell attacks' status as "messianic arrest of happening" means that their effectivity cannot be known, much as Benjamin's historical materialism's outcome or use cannot be directed in advance to particular aims or interests. The homogeneous empty times of historiography and, in the case of Mackey's novel, narration itself, are disrupted, but as with any syncope, "time" eventually resumes. A chance made available demands action, even as the attacks

represent inaction, their outcome often further creative work, although on other terms than before. To redeem is to re-deem, to change or say again.

Time Now Had a Hole in It

Typically, the cowrie shell attacks, narrated after the fact, end with the split perspective being "healed," N. being brought back into alignment with himself through the intervention of the band and/or through records. Such moments of re-alignment trigger a particular, individual vertigo, a "phantom caress" returning the ego to itself, or at least to a recognizable version of itself fit to speak in its own name. I want to return to the record as it is represented, a representation that plays on the uncertain vacillation between noun and verb, between sound writing and figure writing. The characters in *From a Broken Bottle* have an erotic relation to the music, a relation to it based on its non-substitutability (technical reproduction notwithstanding). Records, like the music they convey, serve as a kind of "technical-ecstatic" foundation for thinking and thinking otherwise, privileging a density of personal and inter-connection, troubling the line between the two. At issue seems to be the communicability of sound; schematically, this communicability refers to both its *extensive* aspect—its distribution across defined space and especially across differing "uses" or interpretations (e.g., the Barthesian "studium")—and its *intensive* aspect—its "own" temporality, materiality and "inoculative" capacity (e.g., the Barthesian "punctum"). Though a phonograph may help one imagine oneself in a "community" with others listening to the same record, the alternation of intensive and extensive listenings—the former catching what is most peculiar or personally striking, the latter what is most familiar and locatable within traditions or histories—means that the two modes of listening to the same record produce at least two different objects, multiplied across an unknowable number of anonymous listeners.

The tactile metaphors regarding music's caress or "gruff embrace"—the "song so black it / burnt / my lip"—are one means through which the text problematizes any simple privileging of the aural, reminding us that listening is not a passive activity but an active one, the sound, even on record, having been partially constructed by the audience. The novel makes the case for recorded music as a dense labyrinth of connections and reconnections, linked through a reciprocal anticipation: the audience anticipates the next sound, and the record anticipates an audience. This structure is thematized and complicated by the appearance, both during live performance and on records of the band, of balloons—later given the name B'Loon and a corresponding story—that come to accompany the performances, seemingly according to their own will. The balloons are perhaps the most "magical" element of the novel, thematizing the irrepressible capacity to say otherwise than one intends, otherwise than what one's words "want to say" that I have called fugitive articulacy.

The first appearance of balloons with text—which mark a central conflict of *Atet A.D.* (with regard to live performances) and *Bass Cathedral* (with regard to a recording)—is in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 25," subtitled "'zar' nth part," in reference to one of several of that poem's mythic locations. In that poem, the balloon functions as an extension of a theme of volitionlessness:

Heard

my head say cradle me, myself cradle
my head. Wondered whose head I meant,
what voice I spoke with, *volitionless*,
feet

stuck to the floor...

A balloon tore

loose, floated off, I called it
back... B'Head looked in from
on high...

(WS 46, my emphasis)

In this sequence, the irregular lines situate "heard" rather than "head" above "feet," lending primacy to sensibility as discussed above, implicitly suggesting affection—e.g., having one's ears impressed with sounds from elsewhere—as potentially conditioning an *ecstatic* experience apart but not apart from an "I." The theme of speaking with the voice of another returns, whereupon a "balloon tore / loose," a pun on inspiration, the fraught or illusory nature of the artist's freedom and privileged perspective, and a literalization of the theme of "lost ground," the groundlessness of a thought from the impossible perspective of redemption.

In *Bedouin Hornbook*, balloons appear during N.'s performance with the Crossroads Choir, a near-mythic group N. had been pursuing; the encounter takes place 4 July 1980, raising questions about the trans/national belonging at stake in attending to the ancestors, especially with regard to the balloons' relation to accent/ascent/assent. The ensemble has been playing "Body and Soul," the crowd chant-singing selected lyrics: "my house of cards has no foundation," and "my life revolves around her/ What earthly good am I without her? / My castle has crumbled, / I'm hers, body and soul." N., as he plays, thinks of a seven-day romance he had had. He tries "to sound as much like [Eric] Dolphy as [he] could," feeling himself to be in the endless eighth day, after the end of the love affair, after the creation of a world, a day that "prolonged itself into eternity." This day nonetheless returned to him as if it had passed, eight becoming "upright infinity," eternal return—this endless eighth day is not a day of infinite repetition of the same but of difference, the world of

experience, the world in which we live. While N. plays and reflects on this eddy of time, in his re-telling of it, the audience bursts into spontaneous song, accompanied by "a ball of light [that] bounced from syllable to syllable as in the sing-along cartoons we saw at the movies when I was a kid" (*BH* 123). This sing-along refers to his utopian everywhere-and-nowhere sense of having a "blank check drawn on a closed account," with implied, idiomatic "bounce" differentially accented, crossed with ascent. The "cabalistic ball of light" becomes a white balloon upon which the words "Only One" are written, kept aloft by the audience's play, snidely commenting on the song's romantic claim. This balloon, which comes apparently of its own accord from elsewhere, materializes metaphor, literalizes the ascent of the dead invoked in the "Song of the Andoumboulou," both the *technē* of song and the obligation to repeat the gesture which does not burnish N.'s spirit but "takes [his] breath away" as it rises (*BH* 124). The date, within a U.S. context of national remembrance and celebration of the ideals of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," suggests the ways each of those values is haunted by its opposite: the balloon goes up, but comes down more rapidly.

This ambiguity is reaffirmed in the second instance, which further links N. with Penguin (they both, in my reading, suffer from cowrie shell attacks, though only N.'s go under that name). The letter, dated 28 April 1981, begins with N. telling of a recent gig in Berkeley, and lamenting that the Angel of Dust has not sent him a letter. He goes on to consider the ways that "inarticulacy *spoke*" in a street guitar performance, such speaking of inarticulacy continuing as themes of "what was 'known'" and knowledge refused (*BH* 182, emphasis in original). Through the street performances, N. senses a "loud critique of available options," buoyed by an insistence on slippery, eroding foundations, a feeling of "being ushered...beyond oneself," a sense for which he offers the catachresis "jellyroll," an overheard or "borrowed" term from one of the singers. The stage for the performance is set by the band's discussion

of a suggestively worded advertisement for whipped cream—"Top your favorite bottom with real whipped cream"—retroactively related to both Lambert's "Aggravated Assent" and Penguin's "Bottomed Out," the latter being an improvised "technical ecstatic" melody possessed of a "rough and ready sensuality" girded by "deep, rough and ready grunts" from the baritone saxophone that "seemed to erupt from an ocean's floor" (*BH* 187).⁷¹ Throughout his account of this performance, N. refers to his desire to escape the strictures of bourgeois ideology, to his understanding (and the band's imputed understanding) of "the resident hollow one's apparent solidity concealed," expressed first through Penguin's face as he performs, its left side "tend[ing] to bulge with a wad of breath at the outset of each run" (*BH* 195). This "wad of breath" is thought of as a "cud" that becomes homophonic "could," then attempts to reach from "conditional 'could' to unconditional 'will,'" or promissory "shall" (*BH* 197). There is a complex interplay between band and audience, each of whom has the imputed need to attempt an "unheard-of conception." The audience eggs on the band with ecstatic calls (or responses) such as "uterine hoofbeat" and "navigable drought," while the band, still attempting an "out" from the "centrist ordeal" of consumerist "middle-of-the-road aesthetics," worries about the risk of overstatement in the other direction, a risk N. describes as "haunting the need for new conception it paradoxically fed" (*BH* 202).

The solution, from Lambert, is to add a "new proportion," taking the baritone sax from the performatively supine Penguin and replacing it with a soprano saxophone. out of whose bell issue "bubble after bubble of the sort children make with soapy water." This figure links child's play, amniotic fluid (N. refers to it as an "embryonic proportion"), tactility, and fragility, which in turn figures a connection

⁷¹ Though this is beyond the scope of my present argument, one could profitably consider these "transcribed" performances in terms of the affect they attempt to convey and the varying degrees of technical, musical knowledge they assume.

between audience and band members: a "transitory, nameless oneness" initially attempted by guile, later genuinely, retroactively, felt (*BH* 204). In a later instance, this figured unity, like the ecstatic reach the balloons signify, is referred to as a "tactical attainment," not a communicated or necessary coalescence, but an erotic union, an erotic syncope that neither resists nor affirms an order of thought, so much as a thought suspension of thinking, of those assumptions and presumptuous assertions that postpone thinking. The balloon visitations "initiate" a synaesthetic encounter with music as a kind of thinking in its own right, to be attended to on its own "terms," and to continually reinvent terms so as to avoid the temptations of eternity. A pure encounter of any kind, they suggest, is but a fantasy.

The next balloon appearance is 4 June 1982. In the interim, the balloons, as emblematic of all such revenant visitations (reminders of the openness-from-within of any ensemblic designation), take the form of gender-specific shared dreams and hauntings related to the search for and ultimate addition of a new band member, the drummer Drennette, that comprises much of *Djbot Baghostus's Run*. The band is in Seattle playing Lambert's "Prometheus," Penguin back on his customary oboe with "something to say," the expression "something to say" literalized by the emergence of a "comic strip balloon." The text of that balloon adds a mythico-erotic element to the band's internal mythology of Drennette, imagined/envisioned before-the-fact to be a demiurgic figure alternately named Djeannine (for the males of the band) or Penny (for the females). This scene suggests a relation between the balloons and the "speaking" of articulacy. That which speaks in articulate speech, a concern one might stretch to include N.'s retrospective narrative accounts or records of the music he is involved with—and to the notion of *post-expectancy*, the in-turning of one moment back on itself to recuperate possibilities not pursued, "reminiscing what only / might have been" (*SA* 13). The first use of the term occurs in *Djbot Baghostus's Run* in order

to describe a disjunction between the world Drennette believed herself to be in with her lover, Rick, and the "reality" of the situation, those forces that limit what can be hoped for the future, what future may be hoped for as continuous with the present. It is occasioned by a bike accident, "like walking up a stairway and reaching for a step that isn't there," not the moment of the fall but the re-interpretive moment after.

From this, we might think of the balloons as "playful" a lever against limiting binaries, including the line dividing the so-called ineffable from the more conventionally spoken of.⁷² The balloons are a *demand*, concerned with the communicability of the message, the possibility of communication more than the message itself. Rather than raising a material question about access or technical limitations in the recording or broadcast of sound (the question, indeed the thought, of playing the band's record on the radio has not been brought up), the balloons in particular raise a philosophical question about the *stance* and *substance* of listening. The unwilling, semi-autonomous arrival of the two-dimensional balloons and the relation of their appearance to respiration (or to the length of musical phrase) is evidence. Rather than asking what the balloons say, or what the text means in relation to the music, people question *whether* the balloons, which refuse to be photographed (leading some to enlist the aid of police sketch artists).

The story N. concocts for them is a syncretic mythography. He invokes a sense of history as having not begun, of future-oriented origin. The balloons become the material aspect of B'Loon, a gnostic figure combining earth-diver myths of the loon who "plunges into primeval waters and brings up a mouthful or beakful of mud...from which the earth is then made" and the pseudo-Bahamian "play with B' [for "Brer"]-*Ba* [the Egyptian term for "soul"]...the spirit or embodied soul of namesake

⁷² The point, of course, is not to argue that simply everything can be brought into language, but that to think about what remains ineffable requires a thought of language's communicability, that is, what is communicable in language, and so what we mean when we say something is ineffable, or indescribable.

play." B'Loon, because of this mixed origin, is a "motherless child." This loon who founds and re-founds a world is also soul-kin (a literalized "soul-brother") to the inhabitants of the worlds coming into and going out of being. B'Loon is less resolutely future-oriented than "outside" of time, on another timeline that has access to futurity and to a past that has not passed, a revenant past that he does not so much figure as point to, a counter-enchantment myth that "muddies our mouths with the way the world is."⁷³ Accompanied by words or not, the balloons are more about what cannot be said than what can, the conditions of articulacy. The appearance of balloons during performance suggests an ongoing demand to re-constellate concepts, an ongoing deconstruction that puts origin "outside" any law of general equivalence, making it a non-substitutable (but not irreducible) central category that must be problematized (and, as his name suggests, always already contaminated).

Post-expectancy crosses the personally monumental—that which matters in the individual life—with the publicly monumental, the intensive and the extensive, without reducing one to an "expression" of the other, and thus not trivializing one at the expense of the other. The "ecstatic elsewhere" opposes itself to possible worldviews (*Weltanschauung*) and narrativized life-experiences based on notions of history and historical mediation, and vice-versa. Rather than assuming repetition to be a naturally occurring "act," it names a certain repetition as an obligation, beyond, as it were, the pleasure of repeating. The repetition's post-expectancy, born of time "falling behind itself," exposes the gaze's reversible subject and object not to what was missed, but to what did not happen but was thought to have—post-expectant repetition is palimpsestic, revisionary. Its manner of "seizing" an image or memory is not merely additive or synthetic on the model of "recovery," but syncopative, antithetic: it demands, but largely eschews proffering solutions. Temporality is internally haunted

⁷³ *Atet A.D.* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), 122. Hereafter cited as *AD*.

by its pretenses to fullness, to self-adequacy, with all that could have happened, but did not.

Orpheus Calling

As to whether the concrete block could be construed as playing on or poking fun at historical-materialist precepts, I suppose I'd have to say yes, why not, to "playing on," though poking fun at I'm not sure about. The word "concrete," like any other, creaks... – *Djbot Baghostus's Run*

I would like to conclude my discussion of Mackey's poetics by returning to the secret, as it becomes a theme of concealment or revelation, especially in *Perfume Bottle*. Both embodiment and sexuality recur as themes throughout Mackey's writing, often taking the form of unrequited love, or the pair of "archetypal lovers" who recur throughout *Song*, in much the same way that discussion of affection, phonetics or morphology imply an irreducibly *physical* encounter with language. One afternoon at Venice, N. notes a "quantum increase in public access to 'private' parts," an increase in visible skin that makes him think of Carnival, split between bidding the flesh farewell and taking solace in it; it becomes an approximate notion that refuses "to resolve into fixed, unequivocal meaning" (*BH* 70). Carnival—publicized private parts and privatized public space—leads him to think of "the body's dichotomous desire to extinguish and extend its own mystique," the body's participation in an "open secret" such that to extinguish is to extend the body's mystique. Disclosure, "a further phase of complication," becomes a kind of concealment; the "truth" of the body recedes even as the body is a continually "present" secret. Foregoing what he considers an obvious observation—that "one disrobes to unveil an anticlimactic mystery inverts the shell-as-outer-bone's concealment of nothing if not an esoteric absence of bone"—he

complicates these concerns in a composition entitled "The Slave's Day Off," intending to consider relation between the body, form and resistance. To extend the question of the body and its spaces, to ask about the overlapping notions through which it is apprehended, is similarly to problematize common usage of "exposure" with regard to "the truth" of this or that ideological procedure: to whom does one expose, and how is this exposure "resistance"? What is the relationship between transgressing a rule or a boundary and "resisting" that rule or the regime that enforces it? As Mackey's poetics continually lead us to conclude, despite grammatical structures, one does not speak of "the body," singular, only of plural bodies; the specification of a singular body synchronous with a singular name or identity, fixed through time, is an effect of enframing narratives, or narrative emplotment, including "personal" or sentimental narratives. "The body," that is, is disjoined from the proper in the etymological sense, its blunt materiality crossed with its rhetorical situation despite claims to the contrary, such blunt materiality understood to be another "creaky" positing of materiality.

One is also lead to consider the links between disclosure and enclosure, the enclosure of public space for private enterprise, the spectral "invisible hands" and the force of law. In a semi-public space of Santa Cruz called "Pacific Garden Mall," the band performs, circling "counterclockwise...an uroboric strut, marking every eight beat with an ever so slight stutter-step" for a small, transient audience (*BH* 76). It is one of their few uninvited performances. They are, in the terms of U.S. racist discourse, "out of their place." After a few songs, they begin Lambert's "Aggravated Assent" (which, though not named as such, has an ironic correlation with N.'s "Slave's Day Off"), bells on their feet recalling ankle chains, when the police appear, telling them to disperse because they are making too much noise (*BH* 80). The earlier consideration of public vs. private, and especially being in one's place, is supplemented by a renewed thinking of "inside" and "outside." In the context of this

performance, this secondary consideration takes on a new resonance after a spectator suggests the band's music may be too esoteric or "overly elitist" for public performance: "the private or esoteric is referred to as 'outside,' and the public or exoteric as 'inside.'" N. concludes that revolution, understood broadly, must make "for a lateral displacement (a stepping aside from whatever one thought 'upward' and 'downward' meant)," lest one find oneself merely spinning in a rut or groove, the revolution merely nominal, or literal.⁷⁴

Spinning and circling recur both as literal ambulatory circling and as figural recumbent appeal. At an early audition for a new member of the group, the two females of the group stage a musical protest, Djamila singing what N., recalling her orphan status, describes as "a wordless wrestling with flamenco singing... part wail, part suspended sentence" that eventually takes an "orphanic turn." She lowers her volume at one point to allow "the rest of us [Lambert, Penguin, N., and the would-be member Sun Stick] to catch up with the "not-of-our-time intensity" of her singing (*DBR* 14). The men sit transfixed at her voice's "textureless appeal," its erosive capacity. When she takes up a song recorded by Nancy Wilson, "China," her interaction with Aunt Nancy (who has been renamed "Ain't Nancy" for the occasion) invites the intervention of a "curious compound play of identity and difference" (*DBR* 16). The play seems to involve a temporized excess of embodiment, ahead-of-its-time embodiment that participates in the logic, meaning the structuring effects, of the secret. One could equally write of the "structuring defects": in order to be a secret, open or otherwise, the body must be subject to revelation or unveiling, unconcealment. The secret, that is, must not be kept indefinitely, or it is no secret at all worthy of that

⁷⁴ Another instance of such "invisible hands" or police omnipresence occurs at the end of *Bedouin Hornbook*, in an after-the-fact lecture/libretto called "The Creaking of the Word," with that libretto's protagonist, Flaunted Fifth, being accosted by the police while urinating in a field at the outskirts of town, as his numb right hand, disembodied, caresses Djamila's "pantyleless rump" through her cotton dress, a play on "outskirt" that suggests the body's place in spiritual or sentimental geographies.

name. What power the body has, as secret, lies jointly in its being concealed as secret, and after having been revealed, through the post-expectant re-orientation or "revolution" made available. As *open* secret, however, the secret is poorly kept, its power diminished by the disavowal that attends to it. I know very well a secret is being concealed from me, but I will act as though there were no such secret, which may be, as N. suggests and then disavows, that the body conceals no secret, which is not the same as saying it reveals everything. Thus, "disclosure" is a "further phase of complication": the final unveiling is indefinitely postponed, leaving a "play of identity and difference" no less urgent for its linguistic origin: neither I, nor not-I but in a vital sense both.

The "orphyic turn" is neither the look back that seals Eurydice's fate, nor Orpheus' fatal, Bacchante-infuriating turn away from the company of women.⁷⁵ Instead, it is a pivot between material and immaterial, sensuous and non-sensuous, or known and unknown, an ahead-of-its-time "knowledge" for which "intuition" is too fraught a term. Both noun and verb, an orphyic turn is one tactic, invoking Antonio Gramsci, in the "war of position" on the everyday (the "centrist ordeal" N. frets about), a non-totalizing counter-enchantment N. will later refer to as "no-look obliquity" (*AD* 167).⁷⁶ The modifier "no-look" encapsulates the inevitability of a certain spectacle: one does not look precisely because someone else is looking—it makes spectacle into a tactical advance whose commodification is only partly beside the point. The orphyic turn is not a critique or diagnosis of so-called "ocularcentrism," but a comment on the

⁷⁵ In Raeburn's translation of Ovid, in his despair Orpheus "even started the practice among the Thracian / tribes of turning for love to immature males and of / plucking / the flower of a boy's brief spring before he has come to / his manhood." (Book 10, lines 83-85).

⁷⁶ The context for these comments, which yield the name of their album, is the willful disappearance of their drummer, who worries that they are practicing too much for their album. Hers is a secret "statement," one that gives itself by withholding itself, on the inevitability of error, an openness to errancy, that I cannot develop here.

inevitability of the gaze as two-way relay, a warning against the pre-possession looking tends to entail.

With that in mind, I now turn to two scenes from *Bass Cathedral* that combine spectacle and orphic enchantment. In the first, recounted in a letter dated 18 September 1983, the band has listened to the test pressing of their album and are somewhat alarmed at B'Loon's appearance, during Aunt Nancy's solo (she thinks of the text as a "time-lapse translation" of her "thoughts and feelings extending much further back than the moment of her 'Dream Thief' solo," where they appear) (*BC* 6). Playing a gig at a club called Onaje's, Drennette calls "Dream Thief" (which had debuted during the Santa Cruz performance discussed above). During the performance, she plays a cigar box guitar, which figures in the story for which B'Loon is supposed to be amanuensis. Penguin joins in strumming a broom as if it were a guitar, "seeking leverage on Drennette and Aunt Nancy's churchical exchange," recalling obliquely the haunting visitation that precedes Drennette's addition to the band, then Djamilaa joins in, delaying time with her percussive foot taps, seeking "leverage, an oblique, dislocating fulcrum furthering her own blue-ictic stroll, pianistic strut" (*BC* 13). Lambert then joins in with what N. refers to as a "dance":

he extended his arms in front of his body, hands hanging limp, the classic or stereotypic sleepwalker's pose though his eyes remained open. His arms were extended for balance one soon saw, as he now leaned back on his heels, letting the front of each foot come up off the floor. His heels alone touching the floor, his legs locked at the knee and at a 75° angle with the floor, he proceeded to step in time with the music, walking backwards in a counterclockwise circle (*BC* 13).

Simultaneously literalizing and suggesting the absence "Dream Thief" implies along with a blurring of categories analogous to "loquat" above—are the dreams stolen, the theft dreamt, or the dream itself thief?—Lambert's improbable limbo "in time" is subsequently emulated by N., who, feeling himself "possessed of a non-predicative truth" puts his horn to his lip to play, only to surprise himself by joining in with Lambert's "backwardswalking circle," both follower and, because he's behind Lambert and thus in front from the perspective of their "progress," leader. The phrase "in time" is likewise ambiguous, referring equally to the rhythm of his dance and to the layers of temporality, shared and disclosed, the performance avails itself of. There is *at once* the time of Aunt Nancy's haunted childhood (her father dies shortly after giving her the cigar-box guitar), the time of the balloons that "see deep in to the past and present," the recursive time of their shared Penny/Djeannine dreams, and the "seemingly endless instant" of the performance, among others.

This dilation of time is much like the time of the novel more generally: though published over the course of about twenty-two years (to date, between 1986 and 2008), only about five years of narrative time has passed (as noted above, the letters range between 14 June 1978 and 5 September 1983).⁷⁷ The dilation of time, both on the level of this scene and on the "macro" level of the novel's four parts to date, which largely thwarts conventional character and plot development, suggests a change of scale. It is not that "personal" or "private" time trumps or overshadows "public" or "political" time, but that the lingering development of the former interrogates the latter, implicitly questioning those hierarchies that privilege the latter without carefully considering those whose names and actions will not be considered when "historical" accounts are given. It would not be inaccurate to conclude that historical context is

⁷⁷ Though I cannot pursue this question here, one could ask what, if anything, about this era in particular might be holding Mackey's imagination, what not-yet expired notions or possibilities readers are invited to attend to.

ignored entirely; indeed there is an hypertrophy of context that challenges notions of "progress" and "development." Lambert and N.'s limbo-without-bar suggest tactics for getting around an ongoing ordeal—called variously marginality, centrism, patness, or banality, what we might catachrestically call "the social order." This presumes a certain interaction with the audience: after the performance, the band encounters an audience member who imitates the walk in appreciation.

A later scene more directly thematizes such audience interaction, the confusion of leader and follower, of cause and effect that runs throughout all the work considered here, returning us more directly to questions of the body and so-called "lived experience." In a letter dated 13 February 1983, N. recounts the band's record-release gig at The Studio. For the encore, they play a tune "off the record" called "Djam Suasion," a modified jam session "that avails itself of the impromptu impulse and proceeds on a very bare outline of structure and motif" Djamilaa calls "drift conduits" that allow opportune mistakes to dictate the shape of the piece (*BC* 65).⁷⁸ Extending one of the "drift conduits" used to signal soloists to end into a solo of her own, an "anacrotic run [...] reminiscent idea's utopic wish, would-be return to reminiscent flesh's first awakening" (*BC* 67). The passage concludes by crossing James Brown's "Sex Machine" ("the way I like it is the way it is") with Walter Benjamin's "On the Philosophy of History": "'the way it was' the way one wanted it to be" (*BC* 68). Further alluding to James Brown, the rhythm shifts to a "4/4 shuffle meter" (think "Gonna Have a Funky Good Time (Doin' it to Death)"), which provokes the audience to "dance": "knees bent, asses lowered to the floor but short of outright squat, they assumed something of a jockey's position," seeming to celebrate embodiment as such, "the wonder of arms and legs having a torso to attach to and

⁷⁸ Though somewhat unorthodox, this approach to composition and arrangement, where certain "drift conduits" are made available to the players just prior to performance, calls to mind Butch Morris' "conduction" and Anthony Braxton's Ghost Trance Music.

extend from" as if discovered for the first time (*BC* 68). There is no indication that the audience has any formal or "historical" connection to one another save a common besiegement of abstraction one might understand them to be attempting to escape in the retroactive moment of awareness, the dance itself. The following passage, during which B'Loon visits where the band is but corresponding to the movement of others, is worth rereading in this regard:

Each dancer raised and lowered his or her right arm, pounding his or her right thigh as with a hammer, an ever so restrained hammer whose handle was the dancer's forearm, its head the dancer's fist. It was a methodical, all but robotic pounding, deliberate and insistent yet of a soft, slow-motion cast, as though the air were a viscous liquid the arm strained against, fought to rise and fall, move at all within.

As first hit thigh, at the exact moment fist hit thigh, a balloon emerged (*BC* 69).

The rhythmic and aural patterning that emerges, in part due to the insistent "his or her" used to keep pronoun number agreement and gender neutrality, is comparable to that discussed above. The short *a* [æ] (*hammer, handle*), *o* [ɒ] (*robotic, methodical*), *i* [ɪ] (*liquid, viscous*) along with the repeating *p* and *b* draw attention to themselves as words, a formal supplement to the methodical movements described, insisting on language's specific modes of embodiment, writing's labor. The gender-specific balloons, which recur with each strike of fist to thigh, narrate a man and woman engaging in oral sex, each beginning with the phrase "I lie on my back," each insisting on the nose pressed to the "crack of [the other's] ass," insistently referring in explicit detail to the genitals with frank vulgarity (e.g., "balls," "cunt"). Coupled with

the formal repetitions of words and vowel patterns, one has the sense that these members of the audience have become literal "sex machines." The "enjoyment" of the body becomes explicitly sexual, recalling the word *jazz*'s carnal roots, explicitness becoming the austerity of the martinete, a form of the *cante jondo*, informed by the hammer-and-anvil suggestion of the dance's fist strike.

After the band shifts from 4/4 to a slower "duple time," Djamilaa reinscribes the hammer-and-anvil implication of the dance through the martinete, abetted by Drennette who accents the dancers' movements with well-timed cymbal accents. Invoking cultural crossings—"an Andulusian Ogoun and a Gypsy John Henry," or Isis searching for dismembered Orpheus rather than Osiris—Djamilaa's voice "erase[s] the balloon's X-rated script," rendering them captionless, as much because words become beside the point as because the point shifts more decisively to work, "sacred labor." These crossings, that is, are a "transitive equation," a way of thinking that even questions labor's sacredness precisely by keeping labor open as a question, a question extended by the invocation of "Work Song."⁷⁹ Oscar Brown, Jr.'s lyrics to "Work Song" locate this labor on a chain gang, tacitly invoking conviction without due process, conviction for a crime of necessity, the criminalized act of stealing for sustenance once living off the land has become impossible.⁸⁰ Labor is a modality of "serving time," a modality referenced by Drennette's "monotonous marking of time—a corroborating but...complicating witness" that bespeaks "abject, alienating duration while the very manner of its production seemed intent on underscoring *strike*." "Strike" is another turned word, referring to "would-be liberatory" labor action as much as discipline or labor itself, implicating the body's actions or withheld labor

⁷⁹ The text specifies the version recorded by Cannonball Adderley (whose nickname is sometimes said to be a corruption of "cannibal") with his brother Nat, who composed the song, Bobby Timmons, Sam Jones and Louis Hayes.

⁸⁰ One pertinent couplet suggests the crime is "being hungry and poor."

within juridical and social forms of discipline. It is a reminder that that the body's pleasure can be recuperated by a repressive state apparatus. The band, "*possessed* agents of iterativity," (my emphasis) also mark time, repeating the head of "Work Song," at once extending the moment and refusing to let time pass, labor here also a punning reference to post-expectancy.

The balloons' blankness, anticipate the felt "supple oneness" between band and audience, a sense "that no named aggregate enclosed or could caption." Of course, "one" is also an apparently singular pronoun that inscribes a collectivity, keeping open that strand of Mackey's poetics: every social unity passes through figuration, communicates itself *in*, rather than *through* language. Insofar as this oneness is available retroactively through narrative, it *is* a named aggregate, an effort to supply captions to the blank balloons, which themselves figure the blankness or contingency of an encounter. This oneness, as a tactical naming of the unnameable, is a revolutionary chance or orphic turn, participating in multiple, irreducible times without itself being timeless or necessary. This points back to of the major problems the balloons raise within the plot: one asks of the revenant aesthetic encounter "did that happen?" or "what just happened?" underscoring the unknowability of the event. That this oneness, and the feeling it describes, would be the impossible resolution of the planned and the accidental, the intentional and the aleatory, available only through the mediation of the record or narrative more generally, returns throughout the book. Joe Henderson's flubbed, premature two-note would-be unison line on Andrew Hill's *Point of Departure*, a flub that becomes obvious as a flub only on multiple listenings, becomes the occasion for N.'s reflections on the links between repetition and necessity, repetition and experience, and the recording's vitality. By the end of the scene one is left with N.'s inverted Orpheus, his accidental Pied Piper, uncertain whether one leads or one follows, the fragile, aleatory "community" formed through a

repetitive, iterable experience, the retroactive imputation to music and poetry the orphic capacity to create and sustain erotic conjunctions, an imputation that temporarily lends them that power.

The audience's dance and N.'s posited "supple oneness" amounts to an encounter with the impossible—the audience beyond the blank certitude that there will have been some "ones" who listened, of the synchronicity of this aggregate body so named audience, of any determinate outcome of the risks of such performance or synchronization (i.e., the effectivity of the dance). Though the mechanical dance recapitulates the struggle with or after freedom following Emancipation, highlighting the disciplining of the body that underscores the dance's being understood as freedom, the scene and the iterative, tactical oneness it makes available suggest a reinscription of that discipline into another scene. The dance and the relay that moves the performance from "Sex Machine" to *cante jondo* to "Work Song" to *bulería*, from certain meaning to an invitation to articulate new meanings, suggest a turn away from the body's apocalyptic freight. The escape from "a centrist ordeal" is not conditioned on forgetting the contingencies and sedimentations through which embodiment is possible, not simply through "resistance," but through revolution, an orphic turn.

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CHAPTER 3

THE THEN THAT WILL BE: THE WORK OF DEAD TIME AND THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE

There is uh Now and there is uh Then. Ssall there is. (I bein in uh Now: uh Now bein in uh Then: I bein, in Now in Then, in I will be. I was be too but thats uh Then thats past. That me that was-be is uh me-has-been. Thuh Then that was-be is uh has-been-Then too. Thuh me-has-been sits in thuh be-me: we sit on this porch. Thuh Then thats been somehow sits in thuh Then that will be: same Thens. ... – Suzan-Lori Parks, *The America Play*

Listening to Ghosts

Why doesn't anyone ask me about form? – Suzan-Lori Parks, qtd. in Brustein

This chapter, focusing on the work of playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, raises the question of staging, especially the *staging* of an immediate or historical context, and the limits and openings of such theatricality. Refusing the prescriptions of racial formations, both from racists and putative anti-racists, Parks argues that "As there is no single 'Black Experience,' there is no single 'Black Aesthetic' and there is no one way to feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted."⁸¹ Regarding her ongoing literary project, she says that "there's something else going on" that she's "defining as [she] go[es] along."⁸² Questions of meaning, often rooted in a calculus of racial exceptionalism, become therefore "sentence[s] outside of the play[s]," drawing on a

⁸¹ Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People on Stage," in *The America Play and Other Writings* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1995), 4. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *AP*.

⁸² Shelby Jiggetts, "Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks." *Callaloo*, Vol. 19, No. 2, (Spring, 1996), pg 313.

metonymic algebra whereby figure *x* in the work corresponds to figure *y* in the critic's argument or *z* figure or event in the so-called 'real world'.⁸³ As with Du Bois, considered above, Parks presents above all the challenge of reading her work, whether staged or, as I will consider it here, presented on the page emphasizing openness to the range of questions the literary generates. One such "other question" involves exploring "The-Drama-of-the-Black-Person-as-an-Integral-Facet-of-the-Universe" rather than an historical or sometimes transhistorical given, an orientation that extends the "place" of the black person, and of drama (*AP* 6, 21).

Most generally, the question of belonging, of what is *proper* to the literary text or black writer, take precedence, and must be considered alongside other questions one might ask of literature, without presuming to know in advance. For example, Robert Sanford Brustein argues, "Despite her joyous encounter with language, it *cannot be denied* that Suzan-Lori is also writing plays *about* race."⁸⁴ Certainly, characters are often explicitly raced in her work, but it is not clear that race is always a theme, or in what ways Parks' work is "about" race, if by that is meant notions racial subjection or race as "lived experience." In a similar vein, Elinor Fuchs argues that Parks' early work is in a lineage that includes Beckett and Stein insofar as it pushes the limits of character and upsets traditional dramaturgical temporality, but insists that the figures on stage enact "themes" and "motifs" of "black suffering, loss, and misrepresentation through history," thus subordinating formal concerns to a common blackness.⁸⁵ Jennifer Johung goes further and argues that *despite* "aspects of formal

⁸³ See Steven Druckman "Doo-A-Diddly-Dit-Dit: An Interview with Suzan-Lori Parks and Liz Diamond" in *A Sourcebook of African American Performance: Plays, People, Movement*, ed. Annemarie Bean (London: Routledge, 1999). Hereafter cited as Druckman. Pointedly, the preceding play features a production still from *The America Play* with the caption "In Parks' *The America Play*, the Foundling Father (Reggie Montgomery) allows frustrated African Americans to reenact Lincoln's assassination," in tension with Parks' comments about such criticism.

⁸⁴ Robert Sanford Brustein, *Millennial Stages: Essays and Reviews 2001-2005* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 219, emphasis added.

⁸⁵ *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 103. The very rapid summary of Parks work, to be fair, may be a product of the

experimentation" Parks' works "seem to operate specifically alongside an African American cultural experience," furthering a normative argument that (European) literary experimentation is foreign or not proper to African American cultural production.⁸⁶ In all three cases, the form (i.e., the language) of the text is reduced to mere "surface," while the "real content" is at the level of representation. Rhetorically, the referentiality of texts included within a particular tradition serves to limit or predetermine or pre-limit the directions critical discourse can take, while installing a limit on the play experimentalism might otherwise represent. The (historical or "real world") referent becomes criticism's primary concern, which in turn enables it to tame or neutralize the fundamental lack to which experimental play might point. One might choose the name "Great Hole of History" for this lack, insofar as what is missing is any necessary relation among historical subjects; in Parks' work, reference to real world events is part of a deeper play, the *illimitable* opening onto other contexts and modalities of being, against the constant, equally illimitable threat of loss or erasure.

This chapter reads Parks' work as being *literally* "about" race, drawing on the term's spatial sense—around the outside, on every side—and kinesthetic sense—revolving or rotating. Accenting "about" this way, deferring the ostensive definition it might otherwise introduce, might open up critical possibilities of reading the plays in ways responsible to their *form*, the "joyous encounter with language," and to her stated interest in space and "new equations" for black people on stage. Parks is a thinker of race, as such thinks *with*, rather than merely about race as a pre-constituted object forged in definite historical experience. "A black play [the object she considers and defines in her essay "New Black Math"] *employs* the black not just as a subject, but *as*

magisterial overview Fuchs attempts, but its rapidness and the seemingly "immediate" availability of this particular racial narrative is at issue.

⁸⁶ Jennifer Johung, "Figuring the 'Spells'/Spelling the Figures: Suzan-Lori Parks's 'Scene of Love (?)'" in *Theater Journal*, Vol. 58, No. 1 (2006), p. 40.

a platform, eye and telescope through which it intercourses with the cosmos."⁸⁷

Thought in these terms, *blackness* "as such" cannot be a "fact" apart from its use, that is, apart from the discursive contexts (which cannot be predicted or completely determined) in which it is *functions*, thereby requiring attentive interpretation, or reading.⁸⁸ The primary locus of engagement will be form, especially the staging of overlapping, or hybrid temporalities—e.g., domestic and historical time alongside the "timelessness" of ideology and the present moment. Putting to one side characterological readings, the known socio-politico-historical context and the implied or actual presence of black bodies, I will consider the works' use of the not- or not-yet-present, non-contemporaneity within an articulated "present" and *discontinuity* with the past (as the ideologically construed past whose political value precedes its utterance). These temporal configurations within Parks work serve to upset the orthodoxies of literature, drama, and their criticism. "Blackness" in Parks' work neither refers to the same object, nor to some unchanging object. Instead, it refers to an affirmative difference, a difference that is not simply saying 'no' or defining by opposition.

Along these lines, one must be attentive to what Parks terms ghosts, which is both a description of the figures of the play, of what exceeds the plays and renders the term "character" unsatisfactory:

ghost

A person from, say, time immemorial, from, say, PastLand, from somewhere back there, say, walks into my house. She or he is always alone and will

⁸⁷ Suzan-Lori Parks, "New Black Math" *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (December 2005), 582, emphasis added. Hereafter cited as "Math."

⁸⁸ And here, of course, I am partially following Druckman's suggestion that one might profitably think of Wittgenstein's reflections on language alongside Suzan-Lori Parks' rigorous linguistic play, a crossing I will explore more specifically in the pages that follow.

almost always take up residence in a corner. Why they're alone, I don't know. Perhaps they're coming missionary style—there are always more to follow. Why they choose a corner to stand in I don't know either—maybe because it's the intersection of 2 directions—maybe because it's safe. They are not *characters*. To call them so could be an injustice. They are *figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else's pulse* (AP 12, Parks' emphasis).

The performative uncertainty—e.g., the repeated *say* and *maybe*, and the proliferation of synonyms or metonymic substitutions—along with the subtle spatialization of time ("time immemorial" becomes "back there") serves at least two purposes. On the one hand, it signals a deferral of definition, a comfort with ambiguity and recognition as an opportunity for re-cognition, knowing again what was presumed known. This writing, like much of Parks' work, at once challenges and assumes authority as a means of calling knowledge itself into question. On the other hand, theatrical ambiguity and deferral of definition are also presented as inherent in relation, and in life ("someone else's pulse"). As Derrida remarks, "this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations."⁸⁹ Following this line, I argue that attention to themes of memory and memorialization, and especially the mechanisms of memory will yield a politics of her writing beyond a narrow conception of those forgotten or remembered, those silenced or given voice. Themes of inheritance and generation recur throughout Parks' work, typically accompanied by a concern over speaking *for* those are not present, non-contemporaneous "spectral" moments (i.e., moments that do not or no longer belong to time), moments of dead

⁸⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx* trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge Classics, 2006), xviii, emphasis in original. Hereafter cited as *Specters*.

time between presence and inscription, in a phrase, the mechanisms through which "Thuh Then that's Been somehow sits in the Then that Will Be" (AP 126).

I situate ghosts alongside the notion of "fugitive articulacy" developed in the previous chapter (figures of literal fugitivity recur throughout Parks' work, but they are not centrally at issue here). This "phantom articulation" opens the possibility of an unpredicted line of thought that goes beyond immediate, spontaneous ideological recognition. This thinking is non-prepossessing and fundamentally flexible and affirmative, open even to the concepts and norms of the dominant order without accepting that order as the last determining instance. "Fugitivity" is thus not a simple saying "no" to power, but instead draws its power from the structuring power relations, from their inability to close without remainder. I will consider this call for thinking—an unlimited call for reading and collaboration—in the pages that follow, paying special attention to her critical writing, and her plays *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Venus*.

The Void and the Great Hole of History

History is time that won't quit – Suzan-Lori Parks

In the prefatory essays to *The America Play and Other Plays*, Suzan-Lori Parks assigns her work two primary tasks, in distinction with what she posits as the tasks of the conventional theater: to "produce some reaction of sorts" or "discuss some issue" with a particular, contemporary audience. Stressing literature's ability to make something "actually happen" her first task entails "working theatre like an incubator to create 'new' historical events." The quotation marks around the word "new" signal the risk and even the impossibility of her endeavor: the "new"—both the new event and

the word *new*—is a citation. As we will have to consider the status of the proper in literature, so too does Parks' work lead us to the question of the relationship, if any, between literature and Events. Any unearthed, "silenced" history registers as silent only because it has been previously unacknowledged, or inadequately acknowledged. The play would create nothing: it would be a re-articulation or re-membering. For structural reasons, the task cannot be completed, only begun again:

[because] so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, disremembered, washed out, one of my tasks is to—through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life [i.e., the phenomenal world]—locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. The bones tell us what was, is, will be; and because their song is a play—something that through a production *actually happens*—I'm working theatre like an incubator to create "new" historical events. I'm re-membering and staging historical events that through their happening *on stage* are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history (*AP* 4-5, my emphasis).

The task of creating new events remains ambiguous, not least because the implied invention would itself be an event. Unasked, however, is the relationship between phenomenality—bodies on stage, already marked by race—and those narrated events that comprise the so-called "canon of history." This latter operates as a metonym for "real-life" that separates itself off discursively to govern simultaneously the writing, its performance and its interpretation. The inscribed circle—e.g., the obvious or "undeniable" correspondence between black bodies, black history and black experience—reduces the plays' function precisely to the simple "discussion of issues" Parks disparages, while simultaneously reducing "the" "Black

Experience" to a single origin or originary unity. There would be no new event, no event at all, since anything or anyone that would come would already have been inscribed within a given history, available as referent, the play depends upon for coherence and meaning.

The reference to digging (both funerary and archeological metaphor), raises what for me is the central complication. The "incorporation" of events and people gone, of those no longer or not yet there, relies on knowing *in advance* what peoples and events are relevant, limiting in advance allowable haunting. Thus, a similar logic of exclusion would govern the distinction between those "memories" or artifacts relevant for the project of allowing currently present people to claim, for example, "full citizenship," and which are irrelevant. From this vantage, materiality or phenomenality exist only at the level of metaphor, subtended by a logic of identification that has first passed through ideological recognition, the spontaneous "knowledge" of common myths and codes, the shared assumption of an "homogeneous empty time" that allows the even, lossless transmission of cultural knowledge and value.⁹⁰ This homogeneity undermines and renders ambiguous or merely nominal the heterogeneity implied by the predication "African American history."

Following Parks' metaphors more closely, one imagines that unearthing the dead is legitimate on the grounds that one is trying to win for one's ancestors a place in the "canon of history." That relationship, however, can be established only after the

⁹⁰ For a particularly compelling discussion of ideological recognition opposed to (and determining of) identification, see Louis Althusser's essay "The 'Piccolo Teatro': Bertolazzi and Brecht," pp. 144-149. I am sympathetic to Althusser's discussion of spectatorial identification as relates to Brecht's Epic Theatre and especially his rigorous consideration of the role ideology plays in pre-determining and pre-limiting the content of the work. However, the line Althusser draws between the world of the play and the "real world" wherein the spectator becomes actor seems to me untenable, on the one hand, because of the role of ideology, as Althusser discusses it, and, on the other hand, the aporia between the play's structure the structure of the so-called "real world." The link between the two structures seems incoherent without the presumption that the former is a reflection or "essential section" of the latter, a position that would itself pre-limit the "content" of the work.

bones have been retrieved (her essay, pertinently, is titled "Possession"), made to sing, the song or the listening transcribed into a play, the play performed and interpreted, establishing a circle of performance and under the metonymic sign of blackness. There is an inscribed circle of inheritance, but, as Derrida argues, being an heir does not mean that one must have or receive one's inheritance, for "the *being* of what we are *is* first of all an inheritance" (*Specters* 68, Derrida's emphasis). There need not be imagined an autonomous, intending subject searching for origins or ancestors but a subject always marked by an inheritance, including that part of the inheritance she might reject, outside of questions of will or acknowledgement: we "inherit the thing that allows us to bear witness to it" (*ibid.*).

Blackness, then, is both "inside" the works as an effect of their intended embodiment by black actors, and "outside" the works insofar as interpretation of those bodies relies on prior inscriptions, sedimented ideas, idealizations, and reading practices displaced onto the work as its property. The defining element gives and withholds itself in the same gesture, forever marked by the histories and narratives that contain it. The "black play" hovers at the edge of being and nothingness: "A black play does not exist. / Every play is a black play" ("Math" 577). To put the "the history of History" in question necessitates the re-inscription of history as abyssal, a *void*.⁹¹ Here the void stands between blackness, the determined difference that stands as the outside of the work (and as "outside" or excluded from history), and blackness, the determining, predicating difference that marks the circulation of the plays, and the definition of the plays as "black plays." Though the plays may cite or re-articulate events that are in some sense already known (e.g., because they refer to historical happenings or literary texts), the void implicitly invoked here suggests the need for

⁹¹ One gets a sense of this void similarly, across two languages, in the fifth chapter of Fanon's *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs*, "L'expérience vécue du Noir," ("The Lived Experience of Blackness/the Black") translated and often cited as "The Fact of Blackness."

readings that do more than refer, especially refer negatively to existing axiological norms or faith in the black author's inevitable "resistance" to or "subversion" of racist or white supremacist norms.

Parks does not refer to direct communion with ghosts, but with the *bones* of the ancestors, and that that *bones* sing, and that that singing becomes a play, which then must be performed, even if its primary mode *is* the words performing on the page. The emphasis remains on writing, the "*dead time* within the presence of the living present" as time unredeemed and irrecoverable under the sign or thinking of simple presence.⁹² Indeed, it is here that her demand for infinite readings and re-readings is undercut by the thinking of inheritance, taking on the property and properties of the dead, effects that can be imagined or claimed as belonging to some "us," to some community that exists between and as "us."

In addition to suggesting the finitude of what appears permanent, the possibility of using those structures to some other purpose, the singing of bones brings to mind the disparagement of animism on the one hand, and the charge of cannibalism on the other. One is reminded, for example, of Wilson Harris' account of the Carib bone-flute,⁹³ at once the sign of conquest and shared context, the cannibalism that supposedly separated the savage from the civilized, and the trace of the other in the self. At the level of her text, then, Parks' fundamental gesture is not to silence or reject this image of the self as other, but to affirm and even amplify it, to translate it to other media and present it, already worked, where it can be worked and reworked by a new audience in infinitely new contexts. This call from the other, from the self-as-other, must not be refused, even at the risk of the dissolution of the self. Her gesture, in

⁹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 68.

⁹³ "Adversarial Contexts and Creativity," *New Left Review* 1/54 (November-December 1985), pp. 124-128.

other words, is to consider difference—"as such"—inevitable in the transmission of an inheritance, in the predication of some group of those no longer present or who will-be-present as "ours." The "work of dead time" denies the closure metaphor gestures toward. It marks the spectral phenomenality of the dead, so that this specter is never merely the specter of a known and exhaustible past, but from an unknown past that has escaped determination, or from the future as that which has come back: "The bones tell us what was, is, will be" (AP 4).

Parks' second self-defined tendency runs alongside this encounter between memory and the present moment: an endeavor to "refigure the idea of forward progression" through the relative movements of time and overlapping temporalities as manipulated by a formal strategy she calls "repetition and revision" or "rep & rev." Rep & Rev is the "literal incorporation of the past," the letter of the past to be added to the body of an ongoing writing. Parks privileges music in her formulation and practice of this strategy. The overall effort is to defer narrative *climax* and examine "something larger than one moment" or one sexual encounter, challenging the actors and director (who are themselves readers) to create or imagine forms of life appropriate to the changing text, relating to a more fundamental question regarding the time of reading, or the time of "theatrical experience" (AP 9).

Insofar as Parks' understanding of temporality is circular rather than linear, however, external referents or conflicts can lay no more claim to the status of absolute origin than the beginning of any individual play. The constitutive failure to mark a clean break or origin functions thematically with plays that open onto scenes of waiting for deferred returns, or that begin after the last death. Rep & Rev constructs more complicated narratives that show that "what really happened" cannot be contained by a single narrative or determination of the victors and victims. As a means to call the "history of History" into question, including the histories of a

language and discourse, without the security of a self-identical subject, this means of pursuing history becomes less about revising this or that historical canon, but risks displacing the legitimating grounds of historical research. There is an appeal to a future that may not arrive, and a responsiveness to those not or no longer present, those whose "presence" could not be acknowledged within the ideological limits of an era. As with "phantom articulacy," rep & rev draws attention to that movement between—between two people, for example, or between the then that was and the then that will be. Rep & Rev is a means of opening a question that is to stay open, maintaining the possibility of the unforeseeable event.

Private Language and Chaotic Textuality in Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom

Laughter as *possibility* threatens to destabilize or ironize the categories through which a subject can think or infer, that can unsettle the relation between word, supposed referent or object of the word, and subject of enunciation. Laughter is neither articulate in the sense of a distinct utterance (discourse) nor as a combination of disparate elements; within a given system of signification, however, laughter threatens from within a discursive system *as an externality*, an externality to the discursive system and external to the self. It answers 'yes' to what comes, even to the end. Laughter, as a response that one cannot predict despite the presence of humor, is the possibility of an event in literature.

Laughter shares in the structure of what I have called fugitive or phantom articulacy, but is also a literal component within the plays themselves. One thinks, for example, of The Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln's ritualistic "haw haw haw haw/ (rest)/ HAW HAW HAW HAW" in the *America Play*, or the inverted laughter—

"gaw gaw gaw gaw" (a glottal stop or "strangulated articulation" of the word "gaw"—a transition from laughing to choking) of *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* and *Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*. As a sign, it exceeds meaning not as a refusal of discourse but as an acceptance of all discourse. Charles, a character who figures prominently as the mysterious, deceased figure who haunts Aretha Saxon's dreams in the third part of *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, for example, uses it as a means to conjure a collectivity, a "we" from which Aretha is explicitly excluded:

Charles: [...] Chaos without correct records. Chaos. Aaah. You know what chaos is don't you.

Aretha: No suh. I don't.

Charles: He he he! Aaaaah! Ignorance is bliss! They say ignorance is bliss—only for the ignorant—for those who must endure them *we* find their ignorance anything but blissful. Isn't that right.

Aretha: Yes suh.

Charles: "Yes suh. Yes suh." Heh heh heh heh. Hold them [the children, Anglor and Blanca Saxon, who enter the scene during their conversation] up where I can see them. Thaaaat's it. You will look back on these times and know what was what. Hold em up. There. Thaaaaaat's just fine. Smile. Smile! Smile? Smiiiiile—

(*Clicking of camera*)

(AP 48)⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Parks' orthographical play is worth note here: the number of vowels in *that* and *smile* are all even. Recalling the previous chapter's discussion of words performing on the page, a notion Parks develops in her own critical commentary; this use of even numbers lends a very specific sense of timing to these words, carried out via the form. At the end of the passage, the changing punctuation—"Smile. Smile!

Imperceptible Mutabilities is separated into three main parts with two intermediary parts titled "Third Kingdom" and "Third Kingdom (Reprise)," which feature a chorus of five "seers" (Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Soul-Seer and Over-Seer). The opening section, "Snails," concerns three female roommates—Molly/Mona, Charlene/Chona, Veronica/Verona—dealing with an infestation problem: a mute robber Veronica/Verona has dubbed "Mokus," cockroaches, a Naturalist who also appears as Dr. Lutsky, an exterminator who also seems to be in the business of exterminating people. "Open House," the middle section from which the above-quoted dialogue is taken, concerns a childcare worker named Aretha Saxon whose "expiration date"—simultaneously of lease and life (linking life and property to again pose a question of ipseity and the proper)—is approaching. The last section, "The Greeks (or The Slugs)" concerns Mrs. Sergeant Smith and her children, Muffy, Buffy and Duffy, awaiting Mr. Sergeant Smith's return from war in a space verbally linked to the Third Kingdom. The discrete sections together thematize the uses and meaning of history, the historical record, awaiting the absent or dead, generations, and the control of discourse and meaning. Specifically, the Middle Passage and contemporary race relations are presented here as *themes*—pre-constituted objects of knowledge—rather than *problems* upon which the play symbolically "works." Most reductively, one could say that the play's primary concern is language, the givenness of language and its mediality; neither reducing it to mere instrumentality or functionality as a conveyer of information or that which "reveals" Being, nor reducing it to a phenomenological "as such" or "in itself." The focus here is on the structural possibility of meaning of expression, the limits of saying as "self-expression" or "self-

Smile?"—might therefore be thought to be a series of forms of address, but also notes on how to perform the words (i.e., staccato versus lilting diction, rising versus falling inflection).

knowledge" due to a priority granted to language as intermediate, working *toward*..., or passing *between*....⁹⁵

In "Open House," a bureaucrat, Miss Faith, holds the Book that records the disparate times of the government, a dentist's office (which is linked to Nazi doctors and the Final Solution), history and the Book of Life, reads and enforces its words. In the opening section, Aretha Saxon is leaving her job caring for someone else's children, Anglor and Blanca, who do not recognize her when they encounter her as adults looking to take over her lease and keep her on as a caretaker to some future children. Charles, who only appears in "dreamtime" and in Miss Faith's book, has no stable past, and thus no stable identity beyond his name. He appears as former lover and petty bureaucrat in his own right, analogous to The Naturalist/Dr. Lutsky of the play's first section. Neither of his questions in the cited passage end with question marks, implying that what is at stake in his questions cannot be questioned, is the very substance of this particular discursive encounter he attempts to enforce through the violence of exclusion. The "you" addressed, the only "you" worthy of address, knows what *chaos* is, knows that "their" ignorance is unendurable. His staged laughter, accompanying his demand that Aretha smile for pictures⁹⁶ that will become part of the records through which identity is preserved ("without it, we could be anybody. We would be running around without identities"), maintains Aretha's position as the figure written in books, but not the figure who can write them, a conflict upon which this section turns. As discourse, rather than that which disrupts discourse, Charles' "laughter" is no laughter at all: it exposes the laughing subject to nothing, tacitly

⁹⁵ Parks has said that the Third Kingdom is "that of fungi. Small, overlooked, out of sight, of lesser consequence. All of that. And also: the space between." Qtd. in Ben-Zvi, "'Aroun the Worl': Signifyin(g) Theater of Suzan-Lori Parks." *The Theatrical Gamut: Notes for a Post-Beckettian Stage*. Ed. Enoch Brater. (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 193.

⁹⁶ Such pictures are part of the explicit stage design—this section of the play begins with a slideshow of Aretha, Anglor and Blanca smiling successively wider as the actors read their lines.

upholding the "scene" of which the laughter has always been a part, and of which he will always be a part.

While language necessarily assumes responsibility to some imaginary collectivity, Charles' discourse here is addressed on behalf of, and to, only a particular collectivity—state or institutional power—without being in any way responsible, or responsive, to, for example, Aretha. Far from resisting his discourse, Aretha's questions affirm it. Charles' questions are rhetorical in the strictest sense—they are phatic utterances meant to affirm the existence of discourse. His disposition recalls that of Molly/Mona who, despondent over having been expelled from school for her inability to pronounce words in perfect imitation of her instructors, says, "Once there was uh me named Mona who wondered what she'd talk like if no one listened." The form of this statement—"once there was uh me..."—recurs throughout the play, almost like the set up to a joke. One might be tempted to ask, "What do you mean?" or to laugh. There can be no talking, no language, without the possibility of some other's response, some other's presumed hearing and interpretation, without an anticipated response, as in the case of Charles' speech cited above. The notion of speech with no witness, with no other imagined or present to report or respond to what was said suggests the absurd situation of 'being alone being alone.' Such solitude would be absolute, self-originating and self-sustaining, the utter impossibility of any community or betweenness; this radical solitude, or radical self-identity, is the condition of impossibility for any speech. Unable to do away with the subjunctive grammar—once there was—even this singularity would be iterable, a revenant that returns, as it were, from the future.

The threat—and fantasy—of utterly private "language" runs throughout Parks' oeuvre, most directly dramatized in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* by the five Seers, and the awaited letters from Mr. Smith in the last section, letters that his family may or

may not have received. Insofar as the desire for, or fear of private language is motivated by a corresponding desire to control discourse, one also finds it in the figure of the mute Robber, the unseen bureaucrats who continually defer Mr. Smith's "distinction" and in Miss Faith's constant reference to the Borgesian "Book" as an inflexible, infallible authority. The beginning of the second part of the third section finds Aretha counting an unknown entity that eventually reaches "Thirty-two and uh half," worrying that she must "know thuh size exact," worrying that she will have a "Hole house full" which becomes a "Whole hold full," a mix of strangers and kin. *Hole* becomes *whole*, *house* becomes *hold* becomes *I*: "how many kin kin I hold," the initial pun based on barely audible différence, which suggests that the fullness of the house is a function of its capacity to accept, especially to accept those of a kind. In like manner, there is a highlighted homophonic relation between "kin" and "can," underscoring the subsumed metaphoric relation between Aretha Saxon and, apparently, the Africans transported across the Middle Passage, the short-circuited relationship whereby she moves from being like them to being descended from them, to being identical with them, regardless their place of origin or landing. Miss Faith provides an extra-textual link, from the Book, with the following footnote that marks her initial appearance:

Miss Faith: Footnote #1: The human cargo capacity of the English slaver, the *Brookes*, was about 3,250 square feet. From James A. Rawley, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, G.J. McLeod Limited, 1981, page 283 (AP 43).

This footnote is here performed as part of the main text (which features its own typographical footnotes). It puts Miss Faith "on the scene," so to speak, before her character is formally introduced (her character must be "buzzed," and speaks as if on the telephone), providing an apparently self-interpreting answer to a question that has not been asked, while linking history and the Book from which she reads. Miss Faith

is not speaking as a character in these moments but provides meta-discursive commentary; her lines momentarily suspend the text, apparently, introduce the subtext into the text. When Aretha protests Miss Faith's calculation that "we'll fit six hundred people," Miss Faith follows with a second footnote—"600 slaves were transported on the *Brookes*, although it only had space for 451"—and the admonition "You give me the facts. I draw from them, Maam. I draw from them in accordance with the book" (AP 44). "Drawing from" the facts—the instrumentalization of given historical facts—almost immediately becomes a dental extraction, which "the book says [Aretha is] due for." That "book" again becomes the text of history with footnote three: "The average ratio of slaves per ship, male to female, was 2:1," a fact for which no use immediately presents itself.

The play, especially in written form where, for example, the *Hole/Whole/Hold* transition and the play between extrapolation from "the facts" and the interpolation of extratextual material as essential is most immediately clear, stages a crisis of textuality. Text understood as a mere conveyer of *logos* is both excessive—there are many overlapping texts, with only the "book" of ideology and existing interpretive practices (i.e., other texts) available as mediator or transcendent signifier—and inadequate, unable to interpret itself or signify without the mediation it attempts to cover over. Textuality as thematized in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* only repeats a certain past, and continually fails to respect or determine context. As "practiced" or staged, literature's strangeness and its tendency to interrupt or suspend discourse, to rewrite discourse according to "its own" terms, are active threats.

The text of the footnotes we have been considering refers to a schematic image illustrating the *Brookes'* hold, which it happens was a central part of the iconography English abolitionists deployed as part of their arguments for the end of the transatlantic slave trade. The ship, that is, prior to this play's footnotes was already a

heavily cited ship, perhaps having attained the status of metonym or symbol, so that its name alone was sufficient to invoke the conflicts in which it played a part. In *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, the slave trade is rendered as a problem of the misallocation of space, which is then mixed with domestic space and the space of bodily cavities. The *Brookes* becomes only one image among others, depending entirely on discursive context for meaning, without being reducible to that context or entirely constrained by it. It is an example invoked from a book that is only an instantiation of the transcendent Book, and thus becomes indiscernible from the ambiguous images at the first part of the section, Aretha smiling along with Anglor and Blanca, or those of the first section, Molly and Charlene together. It relates to the action on stage by juxtaposition, having no necessary relationship to them. The *Brookes* can only function as an anachronistic anti-slavery protest, mixed up or confused with the mundane. Domesticity, hospitality, dental work, and historical trauma more broadly—the nine million estimated (by Rawley) to have been taken from Africa is juxtaposed with the six million Jewish people killed during the Holocaust, a quantification that attempts to elide and reduce the singularity of each individual death, instrumentalizing death as the institutions referred to—the slave trade and the Holocaust—instrumentalized each life.

As with Molly/Mona's fantasy of radically isolated discourse, the performed footnotes mime "private language" of a kind: they enact, in part, a critique of the ideologically circumscribed limits of a "black play" by staging an potential subtext in the form of context, delivered by a figure onstage who provides information from a textual margin. The footnotes invite us to question the status of reference to an historically verifiable event—in this case, the operations and dimensions of the *Brookes*—since the event is invoked ambiguously. If we disregard this question, the term "Middle Passage" seems to function as a transcendent signified, conjuring

without fail the *same* event or set of events each time, which among other things would attest to the historical record as perfectible, rendering the task of unearthing or "creating new events" ambiguous.

The citations here encourage us to consider that, as Ludwig Wittgenstein argues in another context, there is only a "queer connection" [*seltsam Verbindung*] between name and named object—a relation of language convention rather than necessity, appearances notwithstanding. Language refers to some "outside" world, but reference is not its sole function, nor does such reference function the same way in all instances. Arguing there is a "queer connection" does not imply that there is *no* connection, only no *natural* connection. What connection there is is an articulated connection, toward particular polemical and political ends. Arguing against those philosophical traditions that claim an essential connection between name and named and that emphasize the necessity of stable referents, Wittgenstein emphasizes the capacity of a word to mean—to be useful within particular language games—even after the referent is no longer present, or its status within our forms of life has been altered.⁹⁷ The particular "language games"—contingently codified ways of using language—within which the invocation of the name "Middle Passage" functions as though the peoples, social practices and institutions that temporally *follow* it therefore follow *from* it, and thus be said to participate in essentially the "changing same" ideologies, traditions or "cultural logics" of domination and subversion. This tendency is troped by the invocation of the *Brookes*, which, as discussed above, had already functioned as a symbolic economy of protest, raising the question of its efficacy as encapsulating that historical event, and of capacity of the discrete practices and

⁹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1958), 19 (§38).

institutions of and tangential to the Middle Passage to adequately account for contemporary "race relations."

Rather than understand the footnotes as referring to the "hard rock" of historical specificity, one might think of them as invoking and partially staging another time, one that cannot be recovered "as it was" or on "its own terms," whatever such might mean. The footnotes raise as question the relation of one time—one *then*—to another, disjoining the "Standard Time Line." Both textual interruption and as a means to fill in gaps in the surreal movements of this third part, that moves from one domestic space to another in the shadow of Aretha's foreordained death, presented as explanatory, as the well-ordered historical facts that provide identities and prevent chaos, these notes represent a kind of gap-free and therefore *empty* knowledge. Requiring and presuming no such being, present or otherwise, who can adequately answer to the identity provided—"overlap's uh gap"—this well-ordered knowledge proves to be the most chaotic element of all. The footnotes, rather than providing context, explanation or elaboration of the events on stage present another layer of information requiring interpretation in its own right, not reducible to or strictly delimited by a single text or Book. But rather than think of this as another instance of the infamous "end of master narratives," or a "mere" "joyous encounter" with language, we might think of it as suggesting that such "master narratives" are simply another mode of discourse that operate through making this talking-to-oneself a legitimate means of producing knowledge and reproducing a *given* (ideological) order. They mark and enact a moment of incongruity, an interruption of the smooth running of the text. Nonetheless, the other discourse from which the footnotes arrive is neither wholly 'outside' the play, nor inextricable from it. The two form a complex unity, simultaneously assuming and undermining textual sovereignty.

"Once there was uh me": Laughter, Errantry, Betweenness

I made up my mind to laugh until I choked [m'amuser jusqu'à étouffer], but laughter had become impossible.

– Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*

The laugh functions as an empty figuration, an unintelligible or radically open articulation: on the one hand, it refuses to mean on its own while on the other hand it reveals the metonymic nature of all subject positions and, to an extent, political action itself, in this case writing history as a political (or politically motivated) act. Through the figure of laughter, both expressly represented on the page through Charles' stage laughter and the structural operation elaborated above, the text of history is thematized *as text*, as writing drawn "in accordance with the book," with the ideologies motivating the study and the other studies alongside which each new study must present itself. This is one way in which "history is time that won't quit." Miss Faith's faith in an unfailing book that contains records of the living and the dead is a fantasy of dead time, exhaustively realized and known time, time as present or once-present, such that one need only know what information—what record of past phenomena—one seeks and then find it in the book. Emphasizing the obligation to in a sense create the phenomena one seeks, the space between phenomenality and writing becomes the space of possible reorientation, of being surprised by some event thought passed. Re-interrogating Molly/Mona's questions from this point of view, we may now wonder not about the fantasy of discourse without interlocutor, and instead wonder about the grammatical structure within which she poses the fantasy: *once there was uh me*.

There *was* a *me*—an object rather than subject pronoun—but there is no longer; the phrase announces neither the death nor the "decentering" of the ego, but

the ego's non-contemporaneity with the enunciating subject. Further, the adverb *there*, which designates a place first in language, indicates the mediation of the ego in and by language, much as the indefinite article *uh* (*a*) suggests an openness to those things that might count or be counted as "mine."⁹⁸ Molly/Mona calls into question, with both the form and sense of her questions, the structures that give the "me" to time or to being,⁹⁹ the structures that simultaneously grant autonomy and make one vulnerable to the other, who is always assumed by the act of enunciation. Within the play, the first invocation of Mona at the beginning of Sub-Division C in the opening section ("once there was a me named Mona who wondered what she'd be like if no one was watchin") *creates* Mona—a self separate from the one The Naturalist/Dr. Lutsky names Molly for an unknown audience—whose primary substance is a different name, a nickname. The "me named Mona," like subsequently renamed characters, occupy a different timeline, one where she "wanted tuh jump ship but didnt," "wondered what she'd be like if no one was watchin," and so on.

The phrase "there is"/"there was" resounds, being used by Molly/Mona, The Naturalist/Dr. Lutsky ("*There was* a woman in Queens," "I hear *there is* one with 'bug bites all over'") and Charlene/Chona ("*There once was* a one Verona named 'Mokus,'"¹⁰⁰ "*There once was* a one name Verona who bit thuh hand that feeds her"), with progressively greater distance between the person speaking and the object of the speech: there was a *me*, a *one*, a *lady* in Queens. In each case, the grammar of the statement invokes someone no longer present, absent save for the discourse that

⁹⁸ This structure is repeated in *The Death of the Very Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, especially in character names such as "Black Woman with Drumstick," and "Black Man with Watermelon." This latter, refusing a necessary connection to the watermelons he is "with," asks "Melons mine?" complaining that the do not have his "mark" or answer to him the way his feet do.

⁹⁹ Derrida pursues this function of "there is" by way of a reading of Heidegger in *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money* trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp.16-24. Hereafter cited as *GT*.

¹⁰⁰ This character is the robber, rendered invisible on the page by his muteness. He depends entirely on other characters or the stage directions to mark his presence.

remembers for some particular purpose, always in relation to the speaker. In Mona's case, the person invoked but now absent is "a me," pointing most directly to the temporal gap between the rote repetition of the narrative impulse and, for example, the disciplinary techniques through which one is "naturally" taught to express oneself in "one's own" mother tongue.

Most fundamentally at stake is not subjectivity or saying "I," speaking in one's own name, but *intersubjectivity*. The repeated "there was a me" suggests that there is no subjectivity "as such" without intersubjectivity, which is both the condition of possibility for any subjectivity, and its condition of impossibility if it be imagined that authentic subjectivity require radical sovereignty—the ability to freely act or speak in the absence of any other.

This implied relation should not be mistaken for any immanent face-to-face relationship or encounter between subjects. That the uneven, conflictual sharing of language figures prominently in this play as an explicit theme, however, will have to serve as a caution before claims of the liberatory or resistant capacity of the anarchic play of language discussed above and in what is to follow. It would also be problematic to abstract from this uneven sharing of language the history of exclusions or elisions of the historical record that then return on the model of the 'return of the repressed' to disrupt the three domestic scenes. At best, there would be a tendentious or "queer connection" between the historical "facts" of the Middle Passage presented throughout those scenes. There is no single locus of concern or target of critique, but an openness to—and demand for—reading, including reading that could splinter or fragment certainty, displace knowledge needed for the coherence of certain philosophical or political statements. Insofar as this play's most fundamental stance to openness to interruption, to digression, to contradiction, our understanding of it as a

political work in the everyday sense depends on a prepossessing standpoint the play does not fully support.

This betweenness, thematized through lines of dialogue that circulate among characters in different, seemingly unrelated scenes, is not simply to be affirmed or championed as a good in itself. It is at once the condition of possibility for the ego, and a limit, a point of the ego's undoing, insofar as it motivates a consideration of the "givenness" of objects, of the self as the object an enunciating subject "gives" herself, only to "give" that self almost immediately to any Other through discourse, to lose this "gift" through temporalization (e.g., "once there *was* a me"). One might re-write Mona's question: what would she *be*, outside of any economy or auto-affection, if no one listened, if none could be imagined who anticipated her coming and prepared a place for it in discourse or knowledge? Would she "be" present, and in what sense would she "be" present outside of any structure or temporalization that would allow her giving also to be a retention that could return her to herself? Such being is impossible, or impossible *to say*. Mona's question, too, is thus itself an instance of parabasis, a figure that systematically interrupts the expectations of a present moment, the trajectory of the play.

What remains, then, is to think the role of parabasis or choral effects, the systematic undoing of understanding that operates extravagantly here and other instances of dialogue throughout the play (one thinks of Mr. Sergeant Smith's soliloquies). One interruption that I have privileged so far is the instantiated rift between an "internal" experience of subjectivity—the capacity to talk of a "me" that has been—and the proper name or persona thought to secure identity across time. Yet the most direct moments of parabasis are in the choral "Third Kingdom" sections,

which feature the five seers, who first come onto the scene by announcing what one takes to be names, each presumably announcing his or her own name:¹⁰¹

Kin-Seer: Kin-Seer

Us-Seer: Us-Seer

Shark-Seer: Shark-Seer

Soul-Seer: Soul-Seer

Over-Seer: Over-Seer

——.

——. (*AP* 37).

The two long dashes occupy the place of the "spell," a temporalized "place where characters experience their pure true simple state," ordinarily marked on the page by the repetition of one or two names with no dialog or action stipulated (*AP* 16). Here, all names here omitted. The recitation of names repeats following the spell, followed by a similar, three-line spell, the last of which is rendered "——..." The ellipsis makes clear the relation of the spell to "the work of dead time," the gap between present phenomena "as such" and writing, implicitly calling such purity, truth and simplicity into question. The enabling ambiguity of this stage direction is typographically marked by the implication that that some element has been removed, or that something continues on that cannot be contained by characters in their *impure*

¹⁰¹ The original cast for this play consists of five actors who play all the roles of the play, irrespective of gender. For simplicity's sake, when pronoun use requires that the Seers' genders be specified, I will do so in accord with the opening-night actors: Over-Seer/Naturalist/Dr. Lutsky/Charles/Duffy – Peter Schmitz; Us-Seer/Veronica/Verona/Aretha Saxon/Mrs. Smith – Pamela Tyson; Soul-Seer/Robber/Miss Faith/Mr. Smith – Jasper McGruder; Kin-Seer/Molly/Mona/Blanca/Muffy – Kenya Scott; Shark-Seer/Charlene/Chona/Anglor/Buffy – Shona Tucker. The reader will note that in some instances of repetition or anticipation of lines from other scenes, the same actor repeats the lines, suggesting a deeper thinking about the nature of personage that I will develop further in relation to other works.

state. Something will have been removed or will have been added in the future (the agency responsible for this removal or addition—e.g., the author, the playwright, the actors—remains unclear); some omission or future arrival will haunt the appearance of bodies on stage, beyond any simple invocation of lack or claims to supplementation by sub- or con-text. The ellipsis figures the "mutability" of the play's title, the room for and imperative *to* change, to extend this moment of performance, of reading, longer than one might be inclined. It figures a paradoxical moment of "free" time within the structure of the play.

The first and third parts gesture toward this indeterminate interval via photography: large photographs and the actors in character accompany or stand in for the "live" actors performing their lines. Within the diegesis of the play, photography is linked with the "good records" that secure identity across time. The unknown time of the photograph—an interval that, unknown, is not in any meaningful sense represented by the plays—is another mode of temporality of the play, what we might call an "indexical trace."¹⁰² As index, it points to the profilmic event itself, the having-been-there of some thing or event to which the photograph points, irrespective of the "content" of the image. As trace, it is that "part" of the image that does not belong to it, that which exceeds the narratives within which it may come to have a place, the past events for which it is supposed to serve as proof or testimony. The photograph's *value* may be in its testamentary capacity, but that capacity does not "belong" to the photograph, much as the photographs in *Imperceptible Mutabilities* properly belong to neither character nor actor, nor to *this* performance or some performance in the future. The non-possessed time of photography implicitly draws attention the "queer connection" between the actor and role, image and subject,

¹⁰² I am borrowing this term from Philip Rosen's discussion of temporality in cinema. See *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

naturalist theater and history's presumption of continuity across time by dint of the staged disjunction between the overlapping times of photo, stage (including all the time of rehearsal and so on), and writing in general. The photographs show figments rather than characters; contrary to the documentary role ascribed to them within the play and their implicit function maintaining order and stability, they prove to be one ambiguous reference among others, gestural but inconclusive if we ask what they mean.¹⁰³

In the choral sections, the questions raised by photography in the first and third and letters in the fifth are approached via the name. Despite the apparent reflexivity (especially in the written text) of the recitation of names, there is no immediate link between the spoken name and the name's speaker; the two are associated by convention—we assume that the characters introduce themselves by self-reference, despite the fact that these names are not used within the play as reference. Indeed, Over-Seer asks Kin-Seer and Soul-Seer, respectively, "Who're you again?" prompting a response from Soul-Seer that anticipates the final section: "Duhdduhnt-he-know-my-name?" We might ask, then, what the names in this intermediate section mean, if meaning is at issue. What does this act of (self-)naming promise or portend, since it is not obvious that one is justified in reading them as an example of agency or self-assertion? What relation, if any, do these figures have to the scenario that that precedes them or that which will follow? Taken together, the recitation of names at the beginning of this first choral section and the repeated or anticipatory dialogue along with the ambiguous role of photography within the play's dialogue and stage

¹⁰³ Speaking of the use of photography in this play, Parks refers to the gap between "preconceived images of African Americans and real people," the latter category being unmarked, analogous perhaps to Althusser's "concrete individuals." The term "real people," that is, performs a particular discursive function within a given polemic; how can one point to the "realness" of the real person and, within the domain traced by the use of photography in general, is the "real person" a function of the character, or vice-versa?

instructions amount to a critique, in the philosophical sense, of reference itself—both reference in the everyday linguistic sense where language is thought to "point" to its object and in the broader historical sense suggested, for example, by the word "recall" or "re-member."

After the second repetition and the ellipsis within which anything could happen or be excluded from happening, Kin-Seer relates a dream:

Kin-Seer: Last night I dreamed of where I comed from. But where I comed from diduhnt look like nowhere like I been.

Soul-Seer: *There were 2 cliffs?*

Kin-Seer: *There were.*

Us-Seer: Uh huhn.

Shark-Seer: 2 cliffs?

Kin-Seer: 2 cliffs: one on each other side thuh world.

Shark-Seer: 2 cliffs?

Kin-Seer: 2 cliffs where the world had cleaved intuh 2.

Over-Seer: The 2nd part comes apart in 2 parts.

Shark-Seer: But we are not in uh boat! (*AP 37, emphasis added*).

This dream of uncanny origin is apparently a repetition: either Kin-Seer has had and has discussed this dream with Soul-Seer at some point in the past, or Soul-Seer has had the same dream (or origin). As the dialogue proceeds, references to boats, "Bleached Bones Man," and, retrospectively, the question "how many kin kin I hold" suggest a loosely allegorical reading whereby the two cliffs they represent the shores of western Africa and the Americas respectively, and that this interstitial space is the Atlantic Ocean as overwritten by memory. On such a reading, this uncanny

origin—Kin-Seer recognizes a place that looks like nothing she's seen—or traumatic originary event is claimed as her own, and the transatlantic slave trade is the event that creates in one stroke "each other side thuh world." The choral sections, then, would be something like the play's structural unconscious, a dream space literalized in part three by Charles' appearance during "dreamtime."

The dialogue recalls the earlier scene (Should I jump? Shouldijumporwhat?—Kin-Seer echoing Mona/Molly) and anticipates later scenes (Duhdunt-he-know-my-name?, Soul-Seer anticipating Muffy in the final section, who is told her name may be code, and thus unspeakable in Mr. Smith's correspondence with the family). The potential simultaneity of references from the past and future within the context of this play reaches its apotheosis in "Third Kingdom (Reprise)," when two or four characters speak at once. In the latter case, two invoke dialogue of the first and last sections of the play, a third invoking a pop song ("Rock the Boat"), and the fourth speaking without relation to other events in the play:

Kin-Seer	Soul-Seer	Shark-Seer	Us-Seer
Wavin wavin	Rock. Thuh Boat.	Shouldijump	Thuh sky was just
wavin wavin wavin	Rock. Thuh Boat.	shouldijump or	as blue!
wavin wavin wavin	Rock. Thuh Boat.	whut?	THUP!
wavin waving	Rock. Thuh Boat	Shouldijump	Thuh sky was just
		shouldijump or	as blue!
		whut?	

(AP 57).¹⁰⁴

Taken together, these are an instance of "uh speech in uh language of codes[,] Secret signs and secret symbols" that fail as immediately meaningful because they

¹⁰⁴ According to Parks' glossary of "foreign words and phrases," "thup" is "(Air intake with sound placed in mouth; liberal use of the tongue.) Slurping." (AP 17).

disrupt the straight line implied by referentiality as horizon of meaning in order to highlight language's capacity to create over and against its (instrumental) capacity to refer or mean (AP 56). Such temporal play makes it difficult to uphold the apparent references to the Middle Passage as *exclusive* references or to make such references determinant "in the last instance" of the play's meaning or political value, taming the strangeness of the language, or reducing it to a simple matter of style. I want to propose a reading of these choral sections that lays accent on the chorus' intermediate position, which corresponds to the "betweenness" cited within the text of this section, and in Parks' accounts of this play. This chorus literally belongs to another time, able to look back and forward through the time of the play, and thus serves as a kind of oblique commentary. Like photography, that is, the chorus might be thought of as a kind of "indexical trace," a reference to past events and, unlike photography, a pointing forward to some future event, without being reducible to this pointing function. Whereas a photograph or historical reference might function as a kind of documentary substrate thought to guarantee the link between the narrative being told and the text of history, this chorus marks a systematic disruption of the work, especially the work of character, and a distillation of time so that, figuratively, any element can interact with any other element.

Of special note is the language itself, with its tortured syntax and functionally needless repetitions and appositions, and the references to fractured subjectivity—Kin-Seer: "And then my Self came up between us [her me and her "uther me," as distinct from her self]. Rose up out of thuh water and standin on them waves my self was standin" (AP 39). Subject and object pronouns interact with the abstract noun implied by both of them, yoked to them by the possessive pronoun "my," which is the only link. That the dreamed originary site "diduhnt look like anywhere like [she had] been," suggests, on the one hand, that the primary means of authenticating this site is

through visual comparison, in this case with an un-remembered space, while, on the other hand, it makes explicit that the site only has to be *like* some place where she has been. In this instance, doubling "like" suggests that the articulated origin is a repetition, that is, non-originary. One gets an elaborated sense of this "sharing" in the trebled "part" ("The 2nd *part* comes *apart* in 2 *parts*), a partition we find elaborated later in this section: "Half the world had fallen away making 2 worlds and a sea between. Those two worlds *inscribe* the Third Kingdom" (AP 38, my emphasis). This "cleavage," which *creates* the two worlds, goes a step further to claim that a certain time has ended: "half the world had fallen away." Insofar as the two worlds "inscribe" the Third Kingdom, history is again rendered as a textual problem, a problem of demarcation made explicit by the revised repetition in "Third Kingdom (Reprise)", where "Word" takes the place of "World," and "were" becomes "are":

Soul-Seer: There are 2 cliffs. 2 Cliffs where the Word has cleaved. Half the Word has fallen away making 2 Words and a space between (AP 55-56).

Within the context of the play's play with spacing and referentiality, or the referential fallacy (the assumption of a necessary relation between signifier and signified in a written work), the space between the "2 Words" suggests that a certain play, which undergirds language's creative capacity—its capacity to create new events, perhaps—as against its function to describe them. But what is this "space," emerging as it does to mark the distinction of the two Words created after the falling off of "half the Word"? And what of this abyssal Word, out of which comes two spaced—and thus potentially meaningful (but not meaning-full)—Words, analogous *in some manner* to Worlds? Does the assertion that every Word carries within itself or accompanies a World, or vice-versa, have any sense? And what relation would these

have to one another without the operation of a system of language or cartography to link them, to provide them with provisional identities? What is ultimately put at issue by this particular revision, following on the fantasy of private language, a language of one's "own" interiority—sharing, the non-owned, im-proper space "between" is the condition of any such ownership. This betweenness, invoking the work of Édouard Glissant, is a figure of errantry, "the knowledge that identity is no longer in the root," that is, in the originating or intending consciousness or a particular experience, "but also in Relation."¹⁰⁵

This errantry, "which always implies [sous-entends] that at some moment it is told," amounts to a poetics, in the context of this play a literal "poetics of relation," considering commonality not of history, humanity, nor even accomplished (that is, existing or successfully meaningful) language, but of a wanting-to-say that is the condition of every written text (*PR* 18, translation modified). From such a vantage point, we might find in the chorus' temporal suspension, its intermediacy, its repetitions and anticipations, a gesturing toward such wanting-to-say as that which subtends relation. We can then read the Third Kingdom as an inoculation against the speaking-to-itself staged via the footnotes: this "space"—the uninhabitable space "between" that connects space to space, the then that was to the then that will be—is not proper to the play. The echoes with other sections, other times of the play are moments wherein the five "seers" are caught up in the language of the Other—present, no-longer-present and not-yet-present—implicated in the Other's wanting-to-say, and in the obligation to make sense of the Other in a way that does not reduce her otherness. Thus, those moments of simultaneous dialogue, the repetition in rapid

¹⁰⁵ Édouard Glissant, *The Poetics of Relation* trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 18. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *PR*.

succession of lines just uttered, the synchronous choked "utterance"¹⁰⁶ that cannot be reduced to the condition of voicelessness all suggest a precarious relation, informed by, but not reducible to, wanting-to-say—language and communicability as temporal concerns whose effects are felt as disruptions in the flow of time. The scenes of waiting—intermediary scenes involving characters after a scene of humiliation or awaiting an uncertain arrival, of a foretold "expiration" ambiguously linked to several incompatible pasts, the patriarch at war awaiting his distinction, whose family waits for him—are part of a generative project that dissimulates the one who waits and the one present for the arrival. In a word, the plays make place for the time of the Event, or thinking the event.

"Third Kingdom (Reprise)" stages a wanting-to-say with its opening gesture, which revises the recitation of names that begins "Third Kingdom." Now, each figure refers to his or her own saying (e.g., Kin-Seer sez), which becomes increasingly referential (e.g., "Sez Kin-Seer sez," "Sezin Shark-seer sez," "Sezin Soul-Seer sezin sez," and so on), increasingly declined before the recitation of the dream, this time conjugated in the present tense ("Tonight I *dream* of where I be-camin from"). There is a more other critical revision, however, of the notion of "betweenness," which now extends beyond errantry, the complex relation through which relative difference emerges. Two figures speak before the recitation and declension of names and seeing:

Over-Seer: What are you doing?

Us-Seer: Throw-ing. Up (*AP* 54).

¹⁰⁶ E.g., Soul-Seer, Us-Seer, Shark-Seer, Kin-Seer and Over-Seer: Gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw gaw—

Without an object (e.g., "throw up *my hands*"), to *throw up* generally connotes vomit, although it seems unlikely that Over-Seer would be unable to see that *immeditately*, and that Us-Seer would pause to respond. Most fundamentally at stake is Over-Seer's implicit right and obligation to ask, to demand an account from Us-Seer. Thus, one might understand Us-Seer's response to be a sarcastic but indirect protest, or, a metonymic expression of disgust. However, following on the previous section where Aretha Saxon is forced to have her teeth extracted, one might do well to focus on the mouth as centrally involved in the act of throwing up. Such focus suggests that the aim here, as with laughter, is *not* expression as the expression of some interiority, a speaking and hearing oneself speak, but breaking the economy of auto-affection. From this perspective, we might be moved toward an alternative reading of the simultaneous choking sounds or the choral dialogue cited above, during which individual voices would be hard to discern, as the reader is unable to read them simultaneously. Toward the end of this section, Over-Seer demands such an account again, with increasing intensity bordering on hysteria:

Over-Seer: What are you doing? What'reya doin. What'reya-doeeeeeee!

WHAT ARE YOU DO-EEE-NUH???

Kin-Seer: —. —: Throw-ing. Kisses (*AP* 57).

The kiss keeps focus on the mouth, specifically on that which leaves the mouth and does not come back. One *gives* a kiss to another, but the recipient of the kiss cannot be said then to *have* that kiss. Even if the kiss is reciprocated, one could not sensibly say that one received *back* his or her *own* kiss, the one initially given to the other. Like the vomit to which it is rhetorically linked, one cannot immediately and without ambiguity say what the kiss "means" or "expresses"; neither is immediately

recuperable within an economy of signification. Note, too, the pause, represented by dashes rather than an ellipsis in the instant Kin-Seer takes before she responds, time enough to throw a kiss, time enough, perhaps, to think. Figures for this caesura—laughter, vomiting, kissing—cannot immediately or without ambiguity be said to "resist" Over-Seer's questioning, nor to pose a counter-question of his right to question. Alongside the Rep & Rev technique, these moments of bodily excess, of unlimited jouissance, tend to make sublime the boundaries of selfhood or personage into by suspending its determining limit, that is, point to the limits of the language games within which agency or selfhood is articulated, the interpellative norms through which subjectivity emerges. Ultimately, the name and the pre-name—"you"—prove to be a part the more general critique of reference this play engages in, and the question becomes not "what would I talk like if no one listened," but rather "what happens when my response, whether I will it or not, does not satisfy the question?" Yet this failure to satisfy cannot be comprehended as a simple refusal or saying "no," but must be considered as a yes, for example to the trace of the other in the self, to what makes selfhood, personage, saying or wanting-to-say impossible.

Venus and the Affirmation of the End

The butt is the past, the posterior; posterity. She's a woman with a big past—
History. —Suzan-Lori Parks

If for Parks the figures in her plays might be thought of as "another person's pulse," perhaps for no other figure is that true than the title character of her 1996 play, *Venus*, inspired by the life of a Khosian woman known as Saartjie Baartman. Perhaps

better known as the "Hottentot Venus,"¹⁰⁷ she was taken from present-day South Africa to Europe in the early Nineteenth Century and put on spectacular display until her death in 1816. Questions of her agency, or even how to address her, if one can address her, inform the structure of the play, which works backwards from the moment she does *not* appear because she is dead, to another moment she does not appear because she has died. This character, like Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog* drifts from the person with whom she shares a name, becoming more personage than person.¹⁰⁸ Rather than compare the figure in the play—variously called Miss Saartjie Baartman/The Girl/The Venus Hottentot—to the historical person whose story inspired the play's narrative, my interest here is development of reference itself as a problem for and of the play, whose concerns Parks characterizes as "History, Memory, Dis-Memory, Remembering, Dismembering, Love, Distance, Time, a Show." As with *Imperceptible Mutabilities*, which *Venus* broadly revises, the mere presence of an historical figure or, again, the use of historically accurate data (i.e., data verifiable according to the prevailing norms of knowledge production) surrounding the incidents of her life amounts either to a recuperation of or "giving voice" to this woman, redeeming her from the system that oppressed her. Rather than staking similitude or likeness to the original as the legitimizing ground of imagining this story, the genius of Parks' play is its play with and on surrender, as both subject and structuring principle. On the other hand, there is always the risk that faithfully reproducing the historical context "as it was" will emboldens that regime. That regime, after all, can then proclaim its magnanimity. It countenances these challenges

¹⁰⁷ "Hottentot" was the colonial name given to the Khiokhoi people of present-day South Africa.

¹⁰⁸ Though the figures named Lincoln and Booth in *Topdog/Underdog*, or the Foundling Father as Abraham Lincoln in *The America Play* refer to important historical personages, the imperfect imitation—the reference to the historical personage—is at issue in both works. In *Venus*, that distance—underscored by the preposition "as" or the insistence that the names are given as a joke—is greatly lessened, though not without controversy.

same Girl. After The Man and The Brother skip town, The Girl comes into the care of The Mother-Showman, who displays her in his menagerie, the "9 Human Wonders," the "9 Lowest Links on Gods Great Chain of Being" (invoking the other eight serve as the Chorus, about which more below). During her stint with The Mother-Showman she becomes "The Venus," whose "big bottoms will put us [The Mother-Showman and the 8 Human Wonders] safely in the black," i.e., financial solvency. After an out-of-sequence court hearing and "A Scene of Love (?)," the Baron Docteur buys her freedom from The Mother-Showman and takes her to Paris with her agreement, where they have an affair and she encourages him to be the "Columbus of anatomy." The affair causes controversy with his wife and "A Grade School Chum," and leads to several aborted pregnancies. Eventually, The Venus is arrested and held on indecency charges. Before she dies, the Negro Resurrectionist, who gets his name from his occupation exhuming corpses for scientific study, agrees to exhume The Venus' corpse for science's sake.

Interspersed with this narrative are five scenes from the play-within-a-play, "For The Love of the Venus," performed only for The Baron Docteur (who watches "almost as if he's watching TV" and), who is in turn watched by The Venus. That play tells a parallel story of a Young Man and his Bride-To-Be, the former concerned to find his "true I," his "place in the Great Chain of Being" (*Venus* 26).¹¹⁰ The Negro Resurrectionist also periodically performs footnotes drawn from The Baron Docteur's notebook, Robert Chambers' 1863 *Book of Days*, Daniel Lysons' *Collectanea*, a fictional autobiography called *The Life of One Called the Venus Hottentot as Told By Herself* (whose title mocks titling conventions of slave narratives). In addition, *Venus*

¹¹⁰ "For Love of the Venus" ultimately resolves itself by the bride-to-be dressing herself up to look like The Venus in order to capture the young man's heart. This recourse to trickery recalls Parks' general interest in con games, and further complicates questions of historical narrative I have been trying to elaborate.

features specially written songs ("The Circus and the Allied Arts" and "The Song of Jack Higgenbottom") a proleptic a scene performed during the Intermission (during which the "audience should be encouraged to walk out of the theatre, take their intermission break, and then return") featuring the Baron Docteur reading from his notebook while the Bride-to-Be from "For Love of the Venus" performs lines from *Venus*, and a brief history of chocolate (performed by The Venus).

As in *Mutabilities*, the footnotes thematize knowledge production and the weight of factuality, incorporating a margin into the main body of the text. They are accompanied in the published play by a glossary whose necessity is hinted at by the dry recitation of antiquated anatomical description from The Baron Docteur's notebook (e.g., "steatopygia—an excessive development of fat on the buttocks especially of females, which is common among the so-called Hottentots and some Negro peoples"). Unlike *Mutabilities*, however, there is no single Book presumed to contain all necessary facts, but a plurality of texts, both real and fabricated; dry recitations of measurements and dates that, failing to add up to anything concrete, only points to an elusive facticity. These data, in other words, only make the reader/spectator aware of the inadequacy of mere knowledge or narrative to account for the desire for presence or full knowledge one might imagine a presentation of the real should satisfy, amounting to little more than babble. Thus, where in *Mutabilities* the presentation of data masquerades as a super-adequate context that supplies the meaning of all things that appear or the spontaneous irruption of the subtext into the text of the play, in *Venus* the presentation of data has the opposite effect. It engenders a greater mystery, a greater sense "great hole of history": "listening to ghosts" involves an active conjuring and an active translation, a movement towards the other that is also a surrender to the other, an openness to being changed by that other. One does not merely expose the historical object or person for another without also exposing oneself

to that object, without desiring that object. Thus, we can say that this play is about (again in the spatial sense) the desire for and of *The Venus* on multiple levels. We might say, in this regard, that the play concerns an erotics of information.

Information is eroticized, making of it both an object of desire and a pre-condition of desire, a pseudo-drive that creates and annuls desire with reference to a fantasy of exhaustive completion of its work. It has as its flipside all the implications of power that attend to uneven access to data, or to knowledge. This flipside—the absence of knowledge which is at once both a means of control and a gap in the functioning of the rule that makes the rule visible—most clearly announces itself at those moments where necessity is expressed in the form of a question—"do I have a choice?"—and especially in exhortations from one character to another that if s/he will only "say yes" s/he will receive some reward in the dimly conceived future, opposing a certain, undesired fate in the immediate future. This "saying yes" is neither fully free nor unfree when it is "given." In this way, erotics in *Venus* marks the opening of an alternative timeline, one that can turn in ways none can envision. This is neither a valorization of "romance" nor a sentimental positing of love or desire as an exclusively redemptive, healing force. Instead, the erotic marks the unbridgeable distance between two people, the gap that necessarily allows messages to be misdelivered, misremembered, systematically ignored. The moment of saying "yes" never appears, strictly speaking, as a constrained choice—her consent is always required and always "freely" given. In the scene's thirty-first scene (which appears after the opening overture), The Man and The Brother attempt to convince The Girl (as *The Venus* is called before she is claimed by The Mother-Showman) to move to London with them as the "African Dancing Princess." Though seemingly excited at the prospect of being a princess, The Girl is nonetheless ambivalent:

The Brother

Say yes¹¹¹ and we'll go tomorrow!

The Girl

Will I be the only one?

The Brother

Oh no, there'll be a whole street full.

The Girl

Im shy.

The Brother

Think of it: Gold!

The Girl

Gold!

The Brother

2 years of work and yd come back rich!

The Girl

Id come back rich!

The Brother

Yd make a mint!

The Girl

A mint! A "mint."

How much is that?

¹¹¹ Though I won't pursue this thought here, such "saying yes" also figures prominently in *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World*, both in the form of unison replies in the choral sections and in self-response: Old Man River: [...] Do drop be dripted? I say "yes" (AP 112), affirming even this "yes" as a citation.

[The Brother glosses the concept of a "mint" as a sum that would allow her to stop working, which she understands as buying a house and hiring help: "Big bags of money!"]

The Girl

I like it.

The Brother

It's settled then!

The Man

Yr a rascal, Brother.

The Girl

Do I have a choice? I'd like to think on it. (*Venus* 16-17).

After two spells, and two rests, The Girl laughs "strangely,"¹¹² and then assents, asking "when do we go?" (*Venus* 18). This laughter is both as an allegory for the punctual destabilization of categories and for irreducible and excessive embodiment. As an ambiguous yes-saying, this laughter here is at once an openness toward the future and an illimitable break with its context—at once a surprise to the self and a limning of its borders, which are simultaneously rendered stable and porous. We are left with the fundamental unknowability of The Venus' desire, whether it is the servant, the bags of money, the travel, the idea of reuniting with The Man whom she recognizes from the past scam (despite his having shaved his beard), some combination of these, or something else that she claims to like. We know that the brothers are attempting a con, but we cannot know what her relationship to that con is, or whether she might intend a counter-con, which could very well be implied by her

¹¹² And one should ask how "strange laughter" might be staged—whether it is strange because it happens at all in this moment, or there is something odd about it, as if it were in another language, or from some place other than the body of the one who laughs.

laugh. To raise the question of The Venus' intentions or agency, the disruptive-productive force of her desire is to open the question of memory/dis-memory, the spoken or unspoken *desire* of the one who remembers to remember for..., the inevitable *interest* implicit in narration and narrative that calls into question a naïvely recuperable historical object outside of all desire. The inevitability of this interest underscores one aspect of what I have here called the erotics of information, the libidinal investments one has in certain facts or understanding of factuality as an immovable "bottom line" that implies many exclusions, including that which cannot be known, such as desire. The strange laugh—"Hahahaha!"—invites us to reconsider the question "do I have a choice?" along different lines, not for their meaning or wanting-to-say but as the more primal question of desire itself. If one can say that, in a certain sense, the scene presents a fateful situation from the point of view of the historical record, and thus for motivated reference to that record, this laugh introduces another, impossible time—the unrecorded, unknowable time of the decision—any decision—itself. The laugh gestures toward an unknowable interval between a subject (as intending subject) and the not-yet undetermined objects of its desire, of the unknowable moment prior to the production of self-identical intentionality, alerting us to the centrality of particular subject predications in historico-ethical judgment. It is not accidental that in the next scene The Girl becomes The Venus, a different kind of subject, inserted into another set of historical relations and horizon of possibility, just as it is not accidental that "*The Venus*" is not quite a proper name, but part of some series, a chain of substitutions and displacements.

Intentionality, the very capacity to intend or meaningfully have a choice, emerges as heterogeneous, divided, an effect—in a word, graphematic rather than logocentric. This "strange laughter" is a "sign" of that which is suppressed in order to produce knowledge, internalized in the structure of the play as its "structural

unconscious." The analogous ultimatums faced by other characters and their similar questioning whether they have a choice might serve as a helpful reminder of the several conflicting, more or less inarticulate desires, more or less recognized constraints that come together to make the *story* of The Venus, as distinct from the historical person for whom we lack even a proper name. Most notable among these other characters are The Mother-Showman, the Baron Docteur and the Negro Resurrectionist, each of whom is forced to choose between an immediate desire—e.g., continuing to eke out a living, an unsanctioned love, a conditioned freedom—and some future-directed wish—e.g., long-term financial security, fame, respectability, avoiding incarceration or censure. Each of these figures, whose "names" are also introduced with a definite article, might best be thought of as allegorical figures that help to raise the question the kinds of choices possible to people inscribed within a relatively immobile social network. As Wonder #7 sings in his/her song "on behalf of myself and The Hottentot Venus, to the Ladies of New York": "we *appear* comme il faut ["as we must," "as we ought to," "as it is necessary"]" (*Venus* 99, Parks' emphasis). In this song, The Venus and Wonder #7 appear as "Priest of the Sun" and "Peruvian Nun," respectively, The Venus "to guard against any possible scandal tonite" having been "conjurd...white." An imperative, beyond what can be addressed in terms of will, conditions all appearance in advance as part of a strategy, conscious or unconscious, of delineation and containment. Indeed, the will itself appears only in response to a demand—for narrative or witnessing—as a retrospective imputation.

The Venus' appearance under names that do not belong to her (only in the playbill is The Venus referred to as "Miss Saartjie Baartman," and once in the play she's referred to as "Little Sarah") suggests her appearing under the conditioned *il faut*—the dense social texture of a ethico-legal system that must consider her actions as an act of will, or intention, and thus cannot countenance the question "do I have a

choice?" Contrary to any possibility, this *il faut* prepares in advance a place for the arrivant, *there*, so that she can only appear on certain terms, as known, is to appear as something already known, as a repetition, *comme il faut*, of some being that has previously appeared, either as the same, in a lineage, or simply "like" that prior appearance. The arrivant must appear, that is, as an inscribable, inscribed *surface*, with no depth, held rigorously within boundaries. One can therefore read the *impersonality* of the play, characterized in part by the lack of proper names, as a gesture toward impropriety, an attempt to negotiate the dichotomy of appearance/disappearance, speech/silence, the *il faut* of any appearance. Going further, one can see the play as "saying yes" to a economy of substitution that both allows and demands one woman—voided of all but her name and a few narrative details—stand in for all of the "Hottentots," for all women of African descent, for a history of exploitation, subjugation and racism, implying a co-implication of poison and cure. By opening the question of desire, however, *Venus* moves to particularize. The Venus, violates the *il faut* not through her desire for this or that person, but by her desire at all, by raising the question of her desire as a legitimate question. Such violation recalls the "founding noise" at the origins of the world or word *as it appears*, here conveyed by the destructive-productive force of desire and time. The Venus—Parks' figure or "platform" for thought—is at once unique and exemplary, marked by an iterability that disrupts her singularity. This iterability marks every level of her figure: the play begins with her heralding by The Negro Resurrectionist, an interlude wherein the characters and choruses name themselves and are named, then:

The Negro Resurrectionist

I regret to inform you that the Venus Hottentot iz dead.

All [includes The Venus]

Dead?

**The Mans Brother, later the Mother-Showman, later the Grade School
Chum**

There wont b inny show tonite.

The Chorus

Dead!

This death, the exchangeability of beginning and end (a similar dialogue recurs in the first scene, inscribing circularity if not circulation into the structure of the play), before the beginning, is at once a literal statement of fact and a challenge to audiences and readers to consider the meaning of this death, her continued circulation, her continued appearance. The declaration that there "wont b inny show tonite" and the staged outrage implicate readers and audience members who might hope simply to have her appear according to a different rule, but that cannot have her appear according to no rule whatsoever, without the limitation of economy, of work, without putting The Venus to work in a predetermined political discourse. If she were not invented, conjured or called to arrive to *this* place for *this* purpose, without the possibility of surprise or deviation, she might exist, not as a newly liberated "unsilenced" voice, present-to-itself and willful, but in some other way for which there may yet be no model. No speech, but a strange laugh.

Structurally speaking, whereas *Mutabilities* presents the five Seers as the play's "unconscious," a stylized performance of bricolage that repeats and anticipates dialogue and conflicts suggesting both a timelessness of conflict and a limited freedom with respect to time, here the role of the Chorus is more or less generalized, extending beyond those eight figures who can properly claim that name. The generalization of the choral function is especially marked in the opening and concluding sections where

the figures name themselves according to their changing roles. The group of eight who serve variously as the Chorus of the 8 Human Wonders, the Spectators, the Court and the 8 Anatomists have serve as an explicit intertext or textual supplement, marking the insufficiency of simply dramatizing the historical record and letting the "facts speak for themselves." What is labeled "chorus" in *Venus*, moreover, does not exclusively address the audience as in classical Greek theater, but interacts with the principle characters at crucial moments. If the chorus traditionally represents a temporary suspension or interruption of the play's forward momentum, the body that goes by that name suggests openness to such interruption, hospitality toward what may come or what may be brought to the play and its unknown performances or readings of the future. I say "suggest" because this openness is incorporated, that is internalized; the play anticipates a particular interruption, a predicted, pre-scripted arrival, and thus no interruption at all. The parodic chorus is of the order of The Brother's "rascability." It is the inscribed place of the rabble, the common, the vulgar; it is precisely that which a respectable or well-heeled "political" (that is, concerned with re-introducing the formerly excluded Venus into a common store of now-vindicated figures) representation would exclude—either literally not countenance or exclude through staged abjection.

The traditional role of the chorus, then, is distributed among all the characters, either directly in the case of *The Venus* and *The Negro Resurrectionist*, or indirectly insofar as *The Baron Docteur's* notebook provides an important staged intertext. Indeed, the staged intertexts shift the ethical locus of the play from the determination, meaning and motivation of individual acts to the principle of selection in reconstituting an historical event, an act of reading that corresponds to the sense of "creating new historical events." Against a backdrop of data, readers and spectators confront the discrepancy between the times *The Venus* might have imagined, with *The*

Man/The Baron Docteur, and the post-expectant outcomes of those encounters. Though, as one of the play's epigraphs states, "le travail humain ressuscite les choses d'entre les mortes" ("human labor resurrects things from the dead"), the play rigorously invokes the limitations of such resurrection, both of our capacity to resurrect and of the uses to which we put that which we have literally or metaphorically unearthed. The Venus' imagined psychological interiority is one such limit, hinted at via reference to her autobiography, *The Life of One Called the Venus Hottentot as Told By Herself*, and the penultimate scene, "The Venus Hottentot Tells the Story of Her Life," where in she allows that while being part of the Mother-Showman's Menagerie "was a shitty shitty life but oh I miss it."¹¹³ Her ambivalence reverberates in her command to the Negro Resurrectionist, serving as jail watchman "don't let them [the crowds she believes to be outside] in," and in her "last words," that is the words she speaks before she "dies," though her figure is marked—even enframed—by death from the opening overture to the Final Chorus: "*Dont look at me / dont look...*" (Venus 159, Parks' emphasis). Upon the event of her death, The Negro Resurrectionist recites the following:

The Negro Resurrectionist

(*Rest*)

"Early in the 19th Century a poor wretched woman was exhibited in England under the appellation of *The Hottentot Venus*. With an intensely ugly figure, distorted beyond all European standards of beauty, she was said to possess precisely the kind of shape which is most admired among her countrymen, the Hottentots"

¹¹³ This repetition is both amplification of point and multiplication of referent: referring to her family and homeland in an earlier scene (Scene 14), she says "I dont wanna go back innny more. / I like your company too much. / Besides, it was a shitty life" (105).

The year was 1810, three years after the Bill for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade had been passed in Parliament, and among protests and denials, horror and fascination her show went on. She died in Paris 5 years later: A plaster cast of her body was once displayed, along with her skeleton, in the *Musee [sic] de L'Homme*.

(*Rest*)

(*Venus* 159).

This text occurs, verbatim, as "Footnote #3: Historical Extract. Category: Literary. From Robert Chambers's *Book of Days*" at the end of Scene 27: Presenting the Mother-Showman and her Great Chain of Being. Coming right after The Venus' dying demand "dont look at me," one can read this moment as inquiring into the relation between the *look* and the *look back*. The first part of the Negro Resurrectionist's recitation is in quotation marks, invoking Chambers' 1863 text, whereas the second part is a revised repetition and elaboration of the same narrative, informed by different political concerns and sympathies. This critical re-orientation emphasizes the ambivalence that underwrites The Venus' spectacularized body, by generalizing it to a broader historic-political context. In the same gesture, it performs the presumed documentary substrate against which one might measure this narrative as "accurate," as satisfactorily completing the turn suggested by The Negro Resurrectionist's revision. The repetition changes the status of these summary statements so that, rather than serving as an adequate vantage point from which to measure the dramatization against the "original" event, it is instead an ambiguous *statement* of context/revised context, at once powerful in its own right and ambiguous with regard to its relation to the play. In isolation, the footnote is analogous to the role canned laughter plays in televised sitcoms (and in other Parks plays, especially in the

365 Plays/365 Days), ostensibly serving as emotional cues for an inattentive audience to accord itself with or perversely transgress. The repetition marks more clearly the ideological argument over the framing of facts as one of the play's central questions, so that, as with canned laughter itself, it presents itself as having done something for the audience, while simultaneously making an implicit demand upon, or challenge to, that same audience. It is an uninflected alienating device: a syncope.

In the first instance, Footnote #3 appears in connection with the Mother-Showman's putting The Venus on display to the horror and fascination of spectators and the other Wonders. The Chorus of 8 Human Wonders has introduced itself, its members stated their properties ("The Wonders pull out all the stops, then they pose in a freakish tableau"), and the newly re-named Venus catches the Negro Resurrectionist watching her. Upon her introduction, there is a spell with The Venus encountering The Chorus of Spectators, at the end of which The Venus declares, "Oh God. Unloved," echoing the Bride-To-Be from "For Love of the Venus," then the Negro Resurrectionist reads the footnote. Alongside the internally produced text, the footnote from Chambers is part of an elaborate, reflexive structure of reference, one that simultaneously provides stability and instability. The effect is a kind of uncanniness, a generative uncertainty, casting readers and spectators between the generality of context and the specificity of *this* text, opening the larger question of referentiality within the work of literature—the more or less self-conscious *citation* (as evocation or conjuring) of "real" events as a kind of internal limit, a *staged* limit that the literature necessarily transgresses, no matter how faithfully it cleaves to actuality as alibi.

Venus invites its readers/spectators to consider what work the unreflexive citation of facts does and what role literature might have as a platform for challenging, utilizing or refuting those facts. Thus, the triple citation serves less to suggest a

plurality of facts or the proliferation of mere interpretation than to highlight the interest that inflects aesthetics in its broadest sense: the sensible and its study. Looking may change its object, but it too is changed by what looks are presumed to monitor it—for example, the "sensus communus" or community standards. When The Venus asks The Negro Resurrectionist, "What you lookin at," he replies, "You. / (*Rest*) / Yr lovely," a view directly challenged by The Mother-Showman who calls her "STEPSISTER-MONKEY TO THE GREAT VENAL/ LOVE /GODDESS," presumably by the Chorus of Spectators (one of whom screams), and of course by Chambers' text. Rather than understanding the conflict to be exclusively one of "European standards of beauty," as in the footnote, the question that emerges is of the ways of seeing—of taste—most broadly.

The context for Footnote #3's uncited repetition, referenced above, is "Scene 2: The Venus Hottentot Tells the Story of Her Life," addressed briefly above. Still worrying about crowds, hers is a "post-expectant" attitude, near death:

The Venus

I was born near the coast, Watchman.

Journeyed some worked some
ended up here.

I would live here I thought but only for uh minute!

Make a mint.

Had plans to.

He had a beard.

Big bags of money!

Where wuz I?

Fell in love. Hhh.

Tried my hand at French.

Gave me a haircut

and thuh claps.

You get thuh picture, huh?

Dont look at me

dont look...

(Rest)

She dies.

(Venus 159)

Save the more personalized detail, The Venus' account varies little from the other two; like the fabricated autobiography, *The Life of One Called the Venus Hottentot as Told by Herself*, this scant summary proves to be another text to interpret rather than an authoritative account. Her testimony here is a kind of parodic disclosure of spectator/reader desire, the final "don't look at me" meant to chastise all those prurient gazes that shaped her predicament, and chastise the spectator/reader for wanting to "see" The Venus unveiled even at this moment, aligning such desire implicitly with that of Baron Docteur and the anatomist community. Such a reading, sticking closely to The Venus as character, and character as representation of historical personage, would condense all the disparate levels of time—e.g., the unrepresented times prior to her encounter with The Man and The Brother, transit from South Africa to England to France, and transition from The Man to The Mother-Showman; the disparate times of the other Wonders, the insistently referenced time after The Venus' death, and so on—into one, enabling an indictment of something like "the Western gaze" by drawing out continuities between imperial, neo-imperial, and empiricist gazes. Such a characterological interpretation, which is the necessary underpinning of

the reading of colonizing and pseudo- or proto-colonizing looks, requires a simplifying resolution of the complex interweaving of those disparate times and the work's structural instability courted by the play's articulation of its present time (undeclared, but presumably the early Nineteenth Century and thus the past) with the imagined present time of its audiences and readers. This interweaving of disparate times, accomplished through citation, proleptic pronouncements of events from the future (from the point of view of the play's articulated present) might better be thought of as an attempt to articulate two epochs, neither of which is fully present to itself *or complete*, in order to figure time as a circle rather than as a line. This circularity, an effect of non-contemporaneity, suggests a limited redemptive power underscoring the archaeological project previously discussed: the bones sing, and through the translation of that song one encounters not the Word but a familiar word desedimented and inscribed anew.

This struggle of the play to articulate its staged present with the contemporary present, and the unknown past with the known, can be considered part of a more general project of considering the place of individual memory and lives in the face of history that runs throughout Parks' work and the projects of the writers considered in this dissertation. From this perspective, The Venus' testimony, which breaks off with an incomplete command just before her death, is given the impossible task of bearing witness to the end, one's own end, and even of affirming it. Her dialogue with The Negro Resurrectionist (a figure marked a by death, even in the euphemism that is his name) marks the only instance in the play that The Venus uses the past tense, a shift in temporal register especially noteworthy due to its proximity to the death that has been ceaselessly foretold. With this shift, it is as though The Venus has finally joined that other narrative perspective, or as if the several levels of time have all come together at the endlessly anticipated, endlessly repeated moment of her death. This temporal

register, though, suggests a greater perspectival shift, which might account for the two commands: "don't look at me," then "don't look." At this moment, there has been a transition, a becoming-specter—announced by her wry "you get thuh picture"—before she literally dies: she takes her self as an object for the first time. "Don't look at me" is both as an anxious attempt to assert control over her appearing, and, in the larger context of the play and its strategic withholding of all proper names, a retroactive call for hospitality, for welcoming her as arrivant or who is also, unavoidably, a revenant, one who has left but who comes back. Look to see, not to pity; do not to take measure but welcome without qualification or reserve; remain open to the strangeness of the stranger, the otherness of the other. The protest of this moment is a pre-emptive challenge to the strategy of exteriorization—that is, of figuration or symbolization—that marks her circulation in one moment as an object of fear and desire, and in another as an emblem of suffering, humiliation and dehumanization. There no privileged way of looking—empathic, sympathetic, loving—excluded from her general demand "don't look at me"; the understood "you" of her imperative address extends without reserve: don't just look, welcome. The end is affirmed as opening unto another beginning, posterity a call out onto future generations.

The Negro Resurrectionist, for his part, also speaks in the past tense—"the year *was...*," "...her show *went* on," and so on—the grammar of his statements implying the vantage of historical distance from the events he describes, including those that his persona is directly responsible for. I have already suggested that he serves the choral role, highlighting the dead time that joins and disjoins the overlapping, repeating and otherwise structured times of the play, the dead time that underwrites and nullifies, for example, the articulation of the times of the play with another. The Negro Resurrectionist, split between the time of the play and the time of its reception, is the figure of the relative free movement between the play's temporal levels, the one who

relates without belonging to any of them. This freedom is not exclusive: The Baron Docteur enjoys a similar freedom—parts of his notebooks are from the future with regard to present time of the play, he is usually the sole audience member for "For the Love of the Venus" (The Negro Resurrectionist fills in once), and he interrupts the Negro Resurrectionist reading his notebooks—and we have just seen The Venus' moment of stepping outside of her time line into this spectral every-time. Only The Negro Resurrectionist, however, is charged with reading the supplementary texts, which is usually freighted with the foreboding of the means and outcomes of The Venus' death. The information he provides—in the form of data, especially weights, measures, and narrative biography—becomes eroticized in its own right to the extent that it supplements an impossible desire, one called The Venus.

This eroticization is most obvious in the written play in Scene 19: "A Scene of Love(?)," which consists entirely of a nine-part spell between The Venus and The Baron Docteur (beginning and ending with The Venus) wherein anything could or could not happen. The play repeatedly stages bilateral, dyadic desire being subordinated or sublimated into a unilateral desire for her, while at the same time reminding us via the Negro Resurrectionist that she is dead. The other structural desire (and there are more than these two) the play points to, for which the recitation from contemporary texts and the show itself is symptomatic, might amount to the desire *of* The Venus, and the implicit question whether any now living might be her desire, or whatever there might be that can be called "her own" desire.

The challenge of The Venus' "interiority"—her desire or mental world broadly—sounds a caution against what I have called the "exteriorizing" projects of knowledge or political filiation (e.g., the ways this childless woman is constructed as an ancestor for contemporary black women in societies whose superficial relation to one another is elevated to a relation of essence). Thinking this interiority not as an

emblem of The Venus' being for-herself, or "if no one listened" but as a demand for hospitality, as a lever through which the specificity of this play's historical concept, and its shaping and re-shaping of political identities are most directly worked out. Indeed, one way of understanding the fixation on The Venus' anatomy, including her skeletal remains is as the search not only for the mystery of her beguiling charm but also of her fundamental difference. *Venus* leaves us to question the mechanism for relating generalities (e.g., women, race, "the body" as a symbol of embodiment) and specificities (e.g., The Venus, *this* body). The play challenges us to recognize that though we cannot think without categories we must remain alert to the historical determination and sedimentation of our categories, alert to those things that escape determination, the radically new.

Considering the play's countdown structure, beginning with the Overture and ending with Scene One, the Final Chorus, inscribing the end in the beginning and vice-verse, we get a sense of the difficult passage marked between known history as fatefully known and the attempt to think the new via what-has-been. Numbered in reverse but moving temporally forward, the play's structure highlights the fatefulness that attends The Venus as character, simultaneously suggesting a paring down, a gradual stripping away of "extraneous detail," only to find the final unveiling impossible, short circuited by death. There can be imagined no simple appearing in a play that has made the complications and hidden imperatives of appearing its topic. As I have pointed out, the play begins and ends with announcements that The Venus is dead, and that "there wont b innny show tonite," a claim repeated at the end of the play. In the concluding scene, The Venus takes over the Negro Resurrectionist's role from the opening Overture, providing the "Tail end of the tale for there must be uh end" summarizing her sins or supposed ignorance of "Godfearin ways," then adding "When Death met Love Death deathd Love/ and left Love to rot" (*Venus* 161). She adds two

demands: "Miss me Miss me Miss me Miss me" and, the words that conclude the play, "*Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me Kiss me*" (*Venus* 162).

The former—*Miss me*—appears for the first time, in response to the announcement of the death of "thuh Venus Hottentot" and the cancellation of the show, the latter—*Kiss me*—appears in both the first and last scenes of the play, in response to the Negro Resurrectionist's announcement of "A Scene of Love (?)" Rather than reading The Venus' living on after death as marking her passage into the stillness of symbolization I propose we understand the emphasis on her death and especially on her speaking from beyond the grave, as engendering the time of the revenant. I propose that she be read as allegory, rather than denying the split between subject and object, between self and non-self in the moment

The Venus encounters herself as an object in the final scene. This ironic fissure becomes the locus for thinking a truly ethical re-membering, one that does not attempt to exclude the dead time between present phenomena and writing, one that does not wholly exteriorize The Venus by negating her interiority or difference from the figure that represents her in discourse. The Venus' reiterated death (as against the non-repeatable death of this figure or of the actual historical person upon whom she is based) colludes with the other incessantly cited figures and historical data to suggest the marking of time in fundamentally linguistic structures. Though the "one called the Hottentot Venus" is made famous for her body, and especially her posterior, The Venus in the play is the embodiment of anteriority and posteriority, of difference and deferral, and of course finitude. The ending is sublime: the impossible, unrepresentable union of all the staged times of The Venus and *Venus* into a singularity that cathects so much desire and so much longing via the call and imagined consummation of a kiss, the aneconomic passage from the mouth never to return.

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CHAPTER 4

WORDS TO REFASHION FUTURES: ICONICITY, FRAGMENTATION AND THE PLURAL INSTANT

For on this ground
trampled with the bull's swathe of whips
where the slave at the crossroads was a red anthill
eaten by moonbeams, by the holy ghosts of his wounds
the Word becomes
again a god and walks among us;
look, here are his rags,
here is his crutch and his satchel
of dreams; here is his hoe and his rude implements

on this ground
on this broken ground
--Kamau Brathwaite, Vévé

Imaging Enjambments: The Ground of the Letter

To this point, I have stressed the materiality of writing and poetics, considering genre, phonetics, grammar and referentiality to argue for the forms of politics—and modes of thinking—that come available when one focuses on *how*—rather than *what*—writing is. This distinction between *how* and *what*, however, is not fully tenable, as becomes obvious when one wants to say that *what* is at issue is *how* rather than *what*. One cannot simply praise the former against the latter without giving the

how ontological priority—its own 'whatness'—that treats it outside of its own embeddedness in the metaphysics of presence grammar makes almost inevitable.¹¹⁴ There is no avoiding the dead time of inscription without attempting to foreclose the question, the thinking such a question might invite. Focusing on Bajan scholar-poet Kamau Brathwaite's recent writing, rendered in a combination of shifting margins, variable typefaces and orthography he calls "Sycorax Video Style" (SVS), this chapter will consider the graphic itself as part of poetry's working to unfix meanings and categories, to inscribe or generate "words to refashion futures." This tremendous work, which has received little critical attention, questions such categories as national and community belonging, and the specificity of postcolonial space. Attending to its insistent graphicity, the formal presentation of writing allows us to consider the ways in which poetry integrates the "being" and function of the letter precisely through the formation and deformation of semiotic networks. In SVS, we might think of these icons that attempt to catch the spontaneous moment of the birth of sense, and through the invocation of video, the transitions and relays of sense. This effort involves a quasi-allegorical privileging of the fragmentary at the level of the representation of the word, and the plurality of any instant, such that any 'now' carries within itself the potentiality to branch into other futures that nonetheless "speak" in the present, previously discussed as "fugitive articulacy."

SVS emerges as part of Brathwaite's explicit effort to respond to "a kind of RIFT VALLEY in my senscape after the psychic disasters of Mexican (86) Shar (88) TTR (90)."¹¹⁵ Here, he refers to his 'Time of Salt,' a series of personal and interpersonal calamities addressed in books documenting the passing of his wife (*Zea*

¹¹⁴ I am indebted to Zac Zimmer, who suggested this line of argumentation.

¹¹⁵ Letter between Kamau Brathwaite and Gordon Rohlehr, cited in *DreamStories* (London: Longman Group Limited 1994), iii. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *DS*. In a later account of his attack in Jamaica, Brathwaite claims his assailants shot him with a 'ghost bullet,' going so far as to narrate his own death in "I Cristobel Colon."

Mexican Diary), the destruction of his home and archives in Jamaica by Hurricane Gilbert (*Shar: Hurricane Poem*), and his near death at the hands of unknown assailants in Jamaica (*Trench Town Rock*). Emphasizing this “sandscape,” I argue for a reading of his work starting from the basis of the icon—a term I am repurposing from Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotics—I will draw attention to the immediate sensory experience of writing or of language, and especially that transition from “mere matter” to sensible sign.¹¹⁶ Privileging this sensory element of the work in the form of the manipulated page layouts and typographies, I argue that what I call the plural instant in Brathwaite’s work, which among other things invokes the formation and deformation of semiotics, lends itself to a *politics* of renewal alongside a poetics of revitalization.

A pre- or partially sensible sign, the icon rests near that minimal spacing or differing a semiotic system presumes and suppresses in order to function: the icon does not mean, but always *potentially* means. Its materiality has not yet been incorporated into any semiotic network. It overflows its frame and exceeds itself, and enters cycles or series wherein it finds itself joined to cycles or series—e.g., the personal, the political, the historical, and so on—which are themselves the products of the more primary inter-subjective relation. Emphasizing the iconicity of words, Sycorax Video Style complicates and extends Brathwaite’s celebrated notion of “nation language,” conceived as a counter-mimesis and the slavish adherence to iambic pentameter with an attempt to develop “the syllables/syllabic intelligence to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience,” rather than, in his example,

¹¹⁶ In Peirce’s tripartite semiotic schema, the field of the semiotic is divided into the Icon, which represents through resemblance or a relation of reason between sign and signified; the Index, which represents its objects through conventional association, such that one sign points to another; and the Symbol, which operates according to habits. Though space prohibits me from developing this more fully, the important trait for my purposes is that the Icon is that it is any object whatever that can be substituted for any other, outside of an established set of norms through which the relation has been naturalized or made conventional.

snow falling on the sugarcane fields.¹¹⁷ "Nation language," favored over dialect, refers to "the *submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience" (ibid., Brathwaite's emphasis). In practice, this submerged "aspect" might produce "English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave." Dialect, by contrast, is externalizing or othering "language used when you want to make fun of someone," belonging primarily to the province of caricature (*HV* 13). This "submerged area" is thus an *index* of looking or looks, valued for the new thinking and possibilities it points toward.

Both nation language and dialect necessarily begin with an externalizing operation that produces language as the object of thought and practice. Dialect treats such language as wholly evocative of the people as a constituted whole (i.e., it is a synecdoche). It is concerned extensities (the phenomenal world insofar as it is known or rationalized within a hegemonic way of organizing knowledge or looks) and takes social divisions that obtain in concrete states of things as real by fundamentally denying time. "The people" is *the* people, now and forever. Thus, the social milieu invoked by a particular language community as figured by dialect is granted permanence; this mode of representation repeats a static image and maintains distance between performer and performed, even as it may draw the conflicts of a given state of things to a point of crisis. Nation language, by contrast treats such language as its own semiotic system that marks the absence of its putative referent (i.e., it is a metonym or allegorical figuration). It concerns itself with the generative, intensive qualities of a living culture, holding "a broken mirror up to broken nature."¹¹⁸ As Brathwaite argues

¹¹⁷ Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), 8. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *HV*. Here as in much of his poetry, the graphic slash (/) appears on the page and the line is unbroken. For sake of clarity, I will use a back slash (\) to represent line breaks where I cite his poetry within my own text, and all forward slashes will be Brathwaite's.

¹¹⁸ Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (Staten Island and Minneapolis: WE Press and XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics, 1999), 104. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *CNM*.

in another context, "as a Caribbean *person*, *we* must start with the ruins and our responsibility is to rebuild those fragments into a whole society," to enact a "revitalization of origins."¹¹⁹ In addition to the ambiguous relation between individual and collective action in this formulation, there is the ambiguous status of this "origin": the paradoxical task is to *rebuild* what has not existed, to *revitalize* what has neither died nor existed as such. The allegorical breakdown or freeing of the icon from extant relations to other signs is not the beginning; one always begins *again*, in the wake of what has gone before. There is no recovery of an origin that is not in a certain sense a conjuration or conjugation of origin—a reiteration for new goals, new structures of thought and feeling. The specifically literary task he pronounces for writing and reading is "to try to see the fragments/whole."¹²⁰

If fragmentation is a constitutive state that must nonetheless continually be produced, the response to this constitutive condition is an active breaking of frames, actively challenging of those schema or frames of knowledge through which differences are perceived and maintained, preserving the heterogeneity of individual and collective bodies. The notion of "breakage" privileges the active differing, and thereby marks those places where a system of knowledge or givens proceeds too quickly to universals (e.g., *the Black Experience*) to cover over ignorance or short-circuit lines of thought. The mirror and nature in Brathwaite's metaphor are both broken, but those breaks are not related to one another; the break in the mirror or visualizing apparatus do not "express" or "reflect" in any straightforward way the breaks in nature, whose "breaks" are ultimately breaks or breakdowns of knowledge. The breaks mark those dissimilarities that must be disavowed to create a fantasy of

¹¹⁹ Nathaniel Mackey, "An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite" in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown (Mid Glamorgan [Wales]: seren, 1995), 23, my emphasis.

¹²⁰ Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens* (Kingston, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974), 7.

adequate knowledge; as such, their being broken suggests and an opening, an invitation for reconfiguration.

Sycorax Video Style, produced on an obsolete Macintosh computer using two different font types, one of which preserves the ragged edges of letters and words when printed, is a key to Brathwaite's project. Through it, modern, albeit "obsolete," technology blends history—the specific political history of a space or political formation (one that often receives technology later and second-hand, for example) and the history of writing—with a pan-diasporic system of mythology and religion. This mixture articulates an aspirant call towards a notion of community that maintains the fragmentation necessary to avoid acceding too quickly to a presumed universality of experience or desire. History, myth, and concrete states of affairs in the present each in turn become icons: an order of figuration that treats nature and history as ordered and made available within time, and the structures that shape its experience.

Into the Image of Sycorax

Through Sycorax, Brathwaite embraces what he calls a genuine "alterNative," a notion of "wholeness" as a genetic element predicated upon difference and differentiation, and to Sycorax Video Style as a procedure related to the hope for a new world, to a non-transcendental "blindness" related to what he calls "trans-liminalness, trans-limitness erasure of xpectant boundar(ies)."¹²¹ The absence of a transcendental signified or universal introduces a situation wherein "meaning"—the unactualized potentiality that overflows the conceptual frameworks through which meaning is assigned—saturates everything (including "silence"). Indeed, the subject itself as the phenomenological intending subject whose integrity rests on an *a priori*

¹²¹ *MR/1: Magical Realism* (New York: Savacou North, 1998), 97. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *MR/1*.

negation that makes all its encounters into *objects* of perception gives way to a "self without ego, without I, without arrogance." The abstract universality of the I and the Self yields to a fluid conception of individuation that does not rest with the self or ego.¹²² Privileging individuation as a process of differentiation, the positive power of individuation is retained, beyond the conditions in extant states of things. Further, the individual is no longer abstract but concrete, no longer static but truly dynamic, allowing fragments to be conceived as open singularities, multiplicities bound by systems of Relation. For the poet, there is a tentative unity in the artwork as an artificially closed form, but the desire for the all-encompassing Book, like the concerns of the artist speaking to or for a people, no longer has a place. Instead, the poet has the task of establishing new metaphors and new connections, of discovering "What kinds of new words are formable? become formidable? What form(s) become possible?" (CNM 274).

"Erasure of expectant boundaries" links with "blindness" to accent expectation, pointing to a procedure for "seeing" or "looking out for" by not seeing *in advance*, a thinking beyond, through and across margins and marginalization, that retains the power of surprise as the force of intensity, of the virtual or potential that opposes the actual or calculated possibility. Brathwaite's turn "into the image of Sycorax"—Caliban's "hidden," submerged or unknown mother—makes new possibilities "visible" through non-naturalist, non-mimetic *presentation*. This "return" to Sycorax, in other words, is not about the maternal (or Glissant's *matrice* as a way of imagining history) but the "origins" of creativity, the "submarine" aspects of writing always "coming into being" but not actualized (CNM 177). Though the sense of the past as potentiality and the past as actuality overlap—like icon in the semiotic sense and the everyday sense

¹²² "Timehri," *Is Massa Day Dead: Black Moods in the Caribbean*, ed. Orde Coombs. (Garden City (NY): Anchor Bay Books, 1974), p. 33. Published as Edward Brathwaite. Hereafter parenthetically in the text as "Timehri."

referring to an object used in religious observance—in Brathwaite's writings, it is important separate them analytically in order better to trace the moments of their coming into purposeful confusion. Through an insistence on technology, from the Timehri or Amerindian petroglyphs ("glimpses of a language, glitters of a vision of a world, scattered utterals of a remote Gestalt; but still there, near, potentially communicative") to the computer itself, Brathwaite works after multiplicities that escape the binaries that tend to occupy most critics (e.g., speech/silence, Prospero/Caliban) ("Timehri" 40).

More than Sycorax, however, I am interested here in the emphases on video, which I will address below, and style. Within poetry, to emphasize the iconicity of words and letters in this way amounts to privileging style. Such privilege de-emphasizes the indexical or symbolic uses of *language*—related to the historically specific conditions under which a sign signifies (and thus those conditions under which literature “expresses,” “reflects” or “responds to” social contradictions)—in favor of idiosyncratic style—those sensual qualities of language and novel usages through which language changes or evolves. Style, the *medium* through which language is encountered, is the possibility of the new in language. Though one can speak of an “historical style” as a set of general tendencies or conventions, style is not strictly determined by historical laws or development, and is not exhaustible in considerations of what a work means. Rather, style marks and exploits gaps in signifying structures whereby meaning can be unfixed, in this case articulating the pre-modern with the modern, and insisting on words’ capacities to “live off—away from—the page.” Already, this ‘living’ suggests an orientation to the literary text beyond or apart from the level of its language, understood as so many references, connotative or denotative meanings, and a role for reading apart from the mechanical reassembly of the author’s, or language’s, intention. If this living is possible, it is only

thinkable by imagining writing as oriented towards a future, or better, future anterior audience, rather than a given audience, and imagining a constitutively unfinished text as a challenge or corrective to notions of the literary work as whole, or sufficient onto itself. The word that lives on, that outlives or survives its mis- or disuse, is the intensive word, its non- or not-yet significant aspect: its iconicity. Living—in this case centered on and always returning to the page, the material letter and its spacing—is effected at once by 'taking us back' to textual practices of the Middle Ages and the integration of those with the new possibilities for writing and publishing of contemporary print technology. SVS's insistence on writing and process, alongside its incorporation of other texts further emphasize writing's mediality, while as a result de-emphasizing the unity of the artwork in favor of a revived notion of reading. To borrow a metaphor from video, the possibility of noise, including visual noise, points less to the non-signifying aspects of language than to the overabundance of signification in language, and the means through which convention acts to predetermine and suppress the "non-essential."

This noise is that element of language that persists and insists in all circumstances wherein meaning must be determined, that 'information' that appears to be irrelevant, precisely by, when attended to, illustrating the ways relevance is always relevance *for* particular aims. Thus, while Brathwaite claims that SVS is part of an attempt to "release the pen from my broeken [sic] hand," and return to the "world of **ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS** when the written word could still hear itself speak, as it were," this "hearing" is not the same thing as self-understanding or self-possession (*CNM* 167, emphasis in original). Hearing here connects difference with difference in a kind of feedback loop, the "voice alight with echo . w/ the birth of sound." Unlike those medieval manuscripts or "scrolls," what would have been didactic, marginal drawings in those earlier texts are incorporated into the writing

itself, typeface becoming an ambiguous element of prosody, or style. SVS marks a threshold separating the experience *of* poetry—the “performance” of words on the page—and the experience *in* poetry—the system of (symbolic) *references* and presumed relations between historically determined peoples discussed or implied.

From Curse to Cursor

The self-referential use of the computer and older printer technology literalizes his arguments, for example, in *History of the Voice*, where he argues that rhythm and syllables are "the very *software*, in a way, of the language" (*HV* 9, emphasis added). The hardware, in this analogy, is the syntagmatic forms into which language is used, which shape its expressivity, which runs underneath anything expressed. In this earlier argument, he privileges music, whose structures he argues he links to native language as "the surest threshold to the language," and noise, or phonic elements of language as performed, both phonetics and timbre, volume, and so on. The innovations of SVS continue—and showcase—his longstanding attention to the slippages and slipperiness of language, and his commitment to neologism (e.g., "stammaments," "skeleton") and variable, internally variant orthography as tools to unfix meanings and desediment thoughts, by introducing semantic and orthographic movement into the text. This movement is augmented by a visual presentation that draws attention to itself as constructed, both futuristic and outmoded, retaining some of the dynamism of the spoken or performed word.

His poem "Letter SycoraX" (*fig. 1*), revised and re-printed as "X self xth letter \ from the thirteenth colonies" (*fig. 2*) dramatizes these concerns. Here are the opening lines:

Dear mamma

i writin yu dis letter/wha?
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists!
well not quite!

i mean de same way dem tief/in gun
power from sheena & taken we blues &

gone
. . .

say
wha? get on wid de same ole
story?

okay
okay
okay
okay

if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle

No mamma!

Figure 1, detail of "Letter Sycorax"

Dear mumma
uh writin yu dis letter
wha?

guess what! pun a computer **O**
kay?

like a jine de mercantilists?

well not quit!

uh mean de same way dem tief/in gun
-power from sheena & taken we blues &
gone

say
wha? get on wid de same ole
story?

okay
okay
okay
okay

if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle?

no
mumma!

Figure 2, detail of "X self xth letter \ from the thirteenth colonies"¹²³

Though the poem's title calls it a letter, its dialogic structure (between X/Self and his mother, whom Brathwaite occasionally identifies as Caliban and Sycorax) is perhaps its most striking feature, drawn out more clearly in the revision where the second speaker is given her own line rather than typographical distinction alone.

¹²³ "Letter SycoraX" is in *Middle Passages* (New York: New Directions Books, 1993), 95-116. "X/Self xth letter from the thirteenth provinces" is in *Ancestors: A Revision of Mother Poem, Sun Poem, and X/Self* (New York: New Direction Books, 2001), 444-456. Both revise "X/Self's Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces," collected in the first publication of *X/Self* (London: Oxford University Press, 1987), 80-87. These three volumes hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *MP*, *Ancestors* and *X/Self*, respectively. For SVS passages, I provide images wherever possible, especially when I cannot produce a facsimile.

Formally, the letter of the poems' titles gestures toward an iconic sense of the Word, underscoring its use, or misuse, apart from its origination. Further, the poem enacts a series of dilations and contractions of time, on a number of semantic levels. The delay between the epistle's being sent and received, for example, is annulled, creating a pun in the title—the letter invoked is both alphabetic character and missive. "Letter" also refers to the mark of education (in the sense "person of letters") insofar as *X/Self* suggests that his use of the computer co-opts the "mercantilist" culture, mirroring that culture's own practice, for which his mother rebukes him: "*say \ wha? get on wid de same ole \ story?*" Her criticism is two-fold: on the one hand, his rehearsal of the mercantilist's history of exploitation and appropriation, however accurate, is pat. Merely knowing of and restating past ills, even if they shape present conditions, is inadequate to the task of justifying or explaining the present, much less changing it. On the other hand, the rest of the poem (and in retrospect, the number of versions of this poem) calls into question the idea that one's actions merely repeat some actions in the past. Along these lines, the poem raises a new question not of the representation of "experience" to some unknowable audience, but leaning to live—and write—in the present, despite the disasters of the past.

The vacillation between the first two senses of "letter"—alphabetic mark and missive—is drawn out in the title, and in the *Ancestors* revision by the enlarged, capital "o" that ends the fourth line, dividing the word "o/kay." The separation of this large **O**, like the lower-case "o" separated from "kay" by a forward slash in the *Middle Passages* and *X/Self* versions, redistributes its function so that graphically it is polysemous. The letter "o," the number zero, a bubble with which to breathe under water (in the context of the trilogy as a long poem), or an open set—a cipher—suspending the sense of the poem, however briefly. The enlargement of the "o" repeats, once again as part of the word "okay" ("*but is one a de bess tings since cicero*

O \ kay?") and again in the middle of a word ("& a whole rash a de so-call creole econOmiss"), as do three enlarged, stylized "x"-es and the character π to replace the letters "pi" in " π \ -san cantos," a reference to Ezra Pound (who "deals in what I call real fragments," without being able to "reconstitute elements"). In the latter case, the hyphen explicitly marks the word's breakage but only after the line break, retroactively creating both the "whole" word and its fragments.

The effects of this partial separation—this fragmentation or mobilization of the word—are not only semantic or rhythmic, however, but also phonetic. In the case of "okay," the pause in reading, however momentary, emphasizes the vowel's sound, the long "o" (/ou/), meaning it is not only part of the semantic rearrangement of the poem, but also part of the phonetic rearrangement of the *Ancestors* version. This version replaces the long "i" (/aɪ/) of the first person pronoun and broad "a" (/ɑ/) of *mama* with the lower short "u" (/ə/), isolating the /aɪ/ of "writin" and "jine," forcing a phonetic link between the two practices that reinforces the link X/Self suggests. Similarly, changing the word "quite" to "quit," in addition to changing the vowel sound from a long "i" (/aɪ/) to a short "i" (/ɪ/), changes the line's meaning. The link between joining the mercantilists and writing remains, but now the respondent encourages more writing rather than disparaging X/Self's supposed mimicry, or celebrating a "natural" difference in the activity of writing because of the identities of the writers (i.e., his use of these "tools" will be different because of his socio-historical identity). The revision also stages X/Self's uncertainty regarding this link ("like a jine the mercantilists?"), and replaces the first-person pronoun (I) with an indefinite article (a) or rhyming syllable (uh), suggesting at once realist fidelity to language use and morphology and a shift away the self or the ego as that around which all impressions and perceptions must be organized. The use of two words to mark the place of the speaking/writing subject introduces a multiple identification.

However, this multiplicity achieves its fullest expression in the verb forms, which become visible only when one looks past the first-person pronoun, and thus the narrative thrust of the poem. As with many of Brathwaite's poetic techniques, however, this particular aspect is masked if one only pays attention to the modes of subjectivity within the poem, as opposed to the forms of individuation that extend to the pre- or sub-subject—acts, hungers, desires, all of the intervals around which subjectivity must constantly be reconstituted. Through the verb forms, which blend present action with past or subjunctive action, the poem structures time internally apart from the caesurae already discussed, which take the form of momentary hesitations between lexical or orthographic values.

Because of the poem's dialogic nature, which emphasizes the instantaneous relation between sender and recipient, I read the phrase "i writin" or "uh writin" as a nation language rendering of the present progressive "I am writing." Brathwaite in all versions of this poem omits the auxiliary verb *to be*, thereby connecting the grammatical subject directly to the participle. The effect of this collapse is to broaden the specific, narrow time of an ongoing act by removing the implicit index or deictic of the act (*I am writing now*). Instead, because the time becomes aporetic (*I am writing? I was writing? I will be writing? I will have been writing? and so on*), the time of the action moves from a definite, though blank *now* to an indefinite time, as in the simple present tense (*now I write, I can write, I tend to write, I will write...*). Put differently, the distinction between writing as habit and writing as memorializing is suspended to the degree that it is no longer entirely clear whether X/Self refers to the specific act recorded by the poem, or to the general act of recording events through writing. Through this collapse, the poem draws attention to the formal presentation of time, creating the sense of an "externally" static time—that is, as poetry it adheres to

certain norms of temporal representation—and an equally "internally" dynamic time—that is, within the poems' use of those norms, new temporal relationships proliferate.

The further effect of Brathwaite's play here is a collapse between the indicative and subjunctive moods, which one sees in such phrases as "like i jine de mercantilists," which itself no longer refers to a specific state of affairs because of the temporal suspension of the initial act upon which it depends. As if I *joined*, or *had joined*, or *were to join*, and so on. I will return below to this indifference of temporal levels, which raises the question of time most generally. Here we see an example of the plural instant: "anticipatory, interlinked & contradictory images," which retain all of the possibilities outlined above, along with a number of other reformulations (*MR/I* 272). In this syntactic arrangement to change one necessitates a change in the other, *or not*. Thus, we see concretely the difference between dialect and nation language. For dialect, as Brathwaite defines it, the written word is an "essential section" that indicates the Other as much as it indicates the writer or speaker. Each becomes terms in the larger dialectic of the form of the work taken as a whole, which will tend toward reconciliation of Self and Other into the Same, or to a rejection of this or that representation without rejecting or commenting upon the system itself. Dialect, that is, operates with the idea of "literal" development, the progression of the letter as development of some other problem that that envelops it.¹²⁴ Nation language, by contrast, remains concerned with potentiality, and with expressivity as capacity and the implication of that capacity in the field it envelops.

The mother's impatience with X/self's pat complaint about mercantilist culture ("de same way dem tief/in gun \ -power from sheena & taken we blues & \ gone") advances the poem's distancing from worries that have become commonplace, but also

¹²⁴ Here, we should contrast Brathwaite's view of dialect with Suzan-Lori Parks', for example, where dialect has a dynamic, generative function not related to accurate or perspicuous representation.

delays the rest of the poem if one considers it from the point of view of narrative: X/Self repeats "okay \ okay \ okay \ okay" and forcefully rejects his mother's taunt (made more obviously a taunt by a question mark the *Middle Passages* version omits)—"if yu cyaan beat prospero \ whistle?" \ "no \ mumma!"—before finally returning to a description of the device rather than its sedimented meanings or values (*Ancestors* 444). Apart from the narrative or theatrical points of view, the columnar repetition, centered on the page, functions as a rhythmic interlude, echoing the initial broken "okay" now without line break. Contrary to the functions typically served by repetition—assisting memorization or drawing attention to particularly important passages, for example—the repetition of this word obscures sense. The word does not clearly express or ask for concession, enact endorsement or agreement, or introduce what the speaker is about to say. It at once a performative "about to say" and refusal to say; beneath that, it is two syllables and four letters in the center of the page, conjoining negative space on either side: graphic marks apart from their meaning function, a moment that expresses expressivity:

okay

okay

okay

okay

(*Ancestors* 444)¹²⁵

¹²⁵ The version of this poem in *X/Self* separates the four "okays" into two couplets separated by a stanza break, enacting a slightly different distribution of space and a seemingly more conversational form:

okay
okay

okay
okay

This moment of the poem is a spatial *division* of the poem, whether we consider it as emphasizing the lines that came before it or those that follow it. As caesura, one of several throughout the poem, it is an errant or "nomadic" distribution of words, a moment of drawing attention to the rules that govern the organization of the poem and the practice of reading, expanding the "territory" of the poem and introducing an element of play. This errantry or nomadism is one of the precise senses in which Brathwaite's work enacts the "trans-liminalness" to which I now turn.

The Word that is Our Threshold to the World

Most of Brathwaite's post 'Time of Salt' publications (e.g., *Shar: Hurricane Poem*, *Barabajan Poems*, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, *Golokwati 2000*, *MR* /) have included either as appendix or as part of the main text a piece co-authored by Carolivia Herron, entitled "Saving the Word." This piece, largely unrevised between printings, is the transcript of Herron's introduction of Brathwaite at a conference on epic poetry 22 September 1988, after Hurricane Gilbert had destroyed his home and archive in Jamaica, and his response to both the hurricane and Herron's introduction. Herron (according to the transcript) breaks off from her prepared comments to invoke "lost words," the Library of Alexandria, and "the long attempt to keep the words of a people from being destroyed."¹²⁶ She then reads a note Brathwaite "wrote when he heard of the hurricane" wherein he repeats and responds to the question—"what can I tell you?"—that serves as the refrain of *Shar*, where "Saving the Word" was first published. Echoing Herron's concern over lost words, Brathwaite asserts, "You have to be concerned with the sources of a poet's life a people's \ inspiration...the archives – that written mem \ orialized recorded record of

¹²⁶ *Shar: Hurricane Poem* (Mona, Kingston (Jamaica): Savacou Publications, 1990). Like *Golokwati 2000*, *Shar* does not provide page numbers. Assuming the first page of "Saving the Word" to be page one, this definition is on page 2. I will use this method for pagination whenever I refer to this work.

his/her life/hope/history/art," proceeding to a condemnation of "our Caribb culture" as "too much a reaction – if not reactionary – plantation culture" (*Shar* 4).

The poem itself (although it is not clear that "Saving the Word" is not part of the poem) begins with a partial catalog of the destruction ("wood \ has become so useless. stripped. wet. \ fragile. broken. totally uninhabitable \ with what we must still build"), alternating such staccato lines with repetitions (e.g. "wasted wasted wasted all all all wasted wasted wasted" or "And what. what. what . what more. what more can I tell you") that transition from despair to defiant or more directly incantatory (*figs.* 3-5):

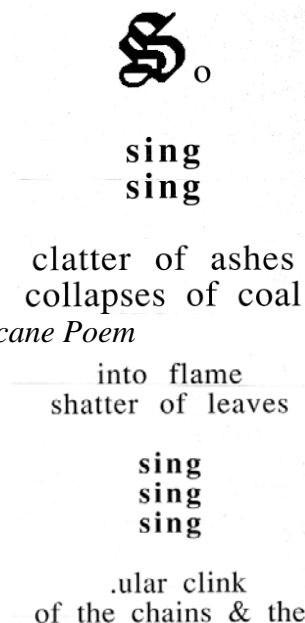


Figure 3, detail of *Shar: Hurricane Poem*

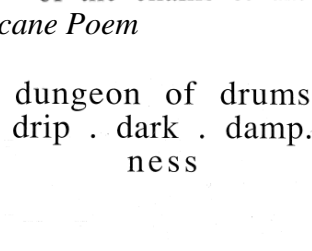


Figure 4, detail of *Shar: Hurricane Poem*



Figure 5, detail of *Shar: Hurricane Poem*¹²⁷

¹²⁷ *Shar: Hurricane Poem*, 23-25. Figures 3, 4 and 5 each occupy an entire page.

The poem generally tends towards such enlargement, which increases the amount of negative space, and serves to "raise the volume" on the words, single them out as words. One page, for example, simply has a repetition of the phrase "& \ sing. \ ing" printed large enough that the period used in the place of a hyphen to break up "singing" appears as a large filled-in circle (*fig. 6*):



Figure 6, detail of *Shar: Hurricane Poem*

Corresponding to this change of typeface is a change of letting (space between lines) and kerning (space between letters), which, like tense, pluralizes the readings of the poem by changing the means through which words are encountered. This alteration, does more than draw out more decisively the graphic elements of writing; it offers a greater sense of motion, both by making words appear closer together or further apart, and by changing the rate and distance eyes must move as they pass over the page. The reader who proceeds too rapidly, for example, will miss the transition from the imperative "sing" to the adjective "singular." Through SVS Brathwaite creates a situation where the reading must begin and return to letters, both as signs within a signifying chain that produce reading and as sensible signs in their own right, most evident with the "Old English" 's' and the large period/circle. If the enlarged capital "O" above is part of a set of elements which act on a center (the technologically mediated scene of writing) and vary in relation to it by evacuating its

temporal specificity to produce a saturated moment, here the recurrent closed "●" designates an unbound graphicity, the differential power or force of the mark. At stake, then, is a semiotics whose horizon or is not strictly linguistic.

Shar emphasizes the concrete word, the word "reduced to all this \ reduced to so little. this \ to so almost nothing like this in the shattered cess of the storm" (*Shar* 11). This intensive word, which has partially abdicated its function as name and its place within an established system of discourse, becomes a different kind of sign. Though it be "useless. stripped. wet. \ fragile. broken," the word, which rhymes with "wood" in Brathwaite's original line, is "uninhabitable" but inhabiting, not as the continued presence of a unity on a transcendent plane, but the proleptic figure of what can be built, of "what we still must build." Through the individuating, differentiating forces of repetition, typesetting, juxtaposition that alters or changes syntax, alternate spellings, neologism and so on, the word itself marks a caesura of an historically determined milieu and the nascence of another, presenting origin as discontinuity.

Brathwaite's name for the "originary" or virtual world, which is neither a "there" nor a "property," is *nam*, an "in-dwelling, man-inhabiting (not inhabiting) organic force" of any concrete cultural milieu.¹²⁸ It is a genetic element and a differential force that has no parts, cannot divide or be partitioned or parceled without changing its nature. Elsewhere, he identifies *nam* with "grit sand pebble seed safe secret \ – unquestioned not necessarily visible – \ out of which strength comes, where the heart of the culture resides in its otherness,"¹²⁹ or again as "capsule, space capsule, seamless container, seed, egg, atom, atomic space within the atom space, its A or Alpha of beginnings/origen. protected by the two most powerfully intransigent

¹²⁸ Brathwaite, *Gods of the Middle Passage* (Mona, Kingston (Jamaica): Savacou Working Papers, 1982), 1.

¹²⁹ Brathwaite, *Golokwati 2000* (New York: Savacou North 2002), 238.

consonantals in the (English) language N&M."¹³⁰ Without pursuing his linguistic argument, it is clear that part of the value of *nam* is its graphic form—its utopic reach—not simply its meaning.

Emphasized in both of these definitions is a notion of discontinuity—a seed may germinate and become a tree, but it does not resemble the tree it becomes; a stone may erode into pebbles, sand or grit, but those three do not have any essential relation or "stoneness" that binds them together. *Nam* refers to genetic or originary fragments that are part of a conflictual—let us not say dialectical—process of becoming. These fragments are relational, differential elements, immanent but non-actual. The situations or objects in which *nam* persists and insists are not the "truth" or "development" of *nam*, which of course cannot be developed or cultivated. Thus, "origen," a Spanish word for *origin* but also *home*, *bottom*, *source*, *provenance*, and so on, does not refer to Brathwaite's celebrated 'discovery' of African origins in the Caribbean, but a more profound movement related to his famous declaration that "the unity is submarine." *Nam*'s immanence is neither reducible to a simple presence, "haunting," nor to heritage or history, though it may subtend all those categories.

Brathwaite links *nam* to "dynamism," "dynamite," "magnamimity" (sic), "man," "immanence" and the "yam" (*Golokwati* 238). Given his reference to the atom and atomic space, I would add the *clinamen* of pre-Socratic philosophy, and with it atomic movement and the multiple and non-localizable relations between atoms. Though the *name*, one of the places where *nam* is actualized be "eaten," the *nam* is an indestructible kernel that belongs neither to that name nor to the person or thing called by that name. In his poetry, *nam* features most prominently in *Ancestors'* "Nam(e)tracks," which revises *Mother Poem*'s "Nametracks." The poem is centered on the page and begins with another enigmatic, black circle followed by the

¹³⁰ Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems* (New York and Kingston (Jamaica): Savacou, 1994), 96.

conjunction "but," signaling a continuation of the previous poem, "Valient," that becomes explicit later when "Nam(e)tracks" repeats the line "the man who possesses us all," the first line of that previous poem, there also preceded by the conjunction "but."¹³¹ Phonetically, the beginning of the poem deploys a similar strategy to his famous "Negus" in *The Arrivants*, though here the refusal to develop a stable syntactic structure marks the movement between those two trilogies from the stammer to the "stammament," a blocked or misrecognized movement of genesis:

●
but

muh
muh
muh
me mudda
mud
black fat
-soft fat man-
ure

Phonetically, this passage is remarkable for its restraint, limiting itself mostly to bilabial or nasal plosives ('b' and 'm,' respectively), labiodental or dental fricatives or ('f' and 'd,' respectively), and a low vowel sound **muh** (/ə/). The effect is of a speaker fumbling to find words, creating a sense of dramatic tension through the first four lines rhythmically released through the phrase "black fat \ -soft fat man- \ ure," but semantically heightened through the compound modifier "fat-soft" that only refers to "fat man-\ure," itself a misdirection moving from "man" to "manure" through enjambment. The repeating soft low sounds broken occasionally by the clacking consonants of "black fat" and "kukoo \ -cook –" in the following stanza phonetically resemble a train arriving or departing, gaining or losing momentum—the sense of

¹³¹ Many of the poems of the revised *Mother Poem* begin with either the conjunction "but" or "so," making a syntactic argument for reading it as a continuous long poem, as Brathwaite insists.

locomotion hinted at in the poem's title—graphically literalized when the poem splits into two relatively independent columns at the start of the fourth stanza, following a second ●:

	muh muh me mudda mud	
doan like wha she see		she doan like e
she doan like e		at all
		she doan like e

(*Ancestors* 86)

This parallel movement occurs in the earlier version of the poem, but begins later. In that version, the five lines presented here are sequential, with the three lines on the right following the two lines on the left. The *Ancestors* version makes it more difficult to decide which "track" to give priority, making one seem to echo the other without being reducible to it. As the poem develops, the right-hand column read speaks of an encounter between the poem's speaker, the mother and a man identified as "ograde" (O'Grady) who attempts to teach the speaker standard diction while the left-hand column tells of an unspecified time (the past? simultaneous with O'Grady's lessons? just after them?) and the mother's dislike of a man (the same man?) who has tormented the family:

●	Say <i>man</i>
	she is tell muh
the man who possesses us all	say <i>man</i>
who break de heart a she	she is tell muh
husband hann	say <i>man</i> say <i>manding</i> say
who wreck de lann a me	<i>mandingo</i>

faddah	
doan possess we at all	●
	but
she is tell muh	ogrady says
●	say I
e di go	say I
e go di	
e go dead	not me
	not man

(*Ancestors* 87)

Though one may out of habit read this poem down the left hand side then down the right, such habit by no means exhausts the possibilities of reading, or even suggests that the only or best way to read is dutifully down the left side then down the right as with a newspaper. The poem *can* be read that way, but other ways of reading—one stanza or more or less arbitrary grouping of lines at a time, first left then right, for example—present themselves and cannot be ruled out absolutely as bad. This is another "plural instant," now deliberately mixing two different relationships to, or "syntheses" of, time. On the one hand, there is the "passive" synthesis of habit. Here, the arrangement of words is a matter of indifference because of the ways one has learned to read and norms of sense-making that appear to us as automatic or natural. If one says that this graphic arrangement is de-naturalizing, it is in the precise sense that this patterning at its limit suggests a situation wherein one no longer knows how to read. On the other hand, there is the active synthesis of memory, a willful act

of seeing the "fragments/whole." The arrangement draws out and suggests very precise relationships and echoes between different parts of the page (e.g., the repeated "she is tell muh"), which may then be read as divided into montagic units by the repeated black circles that are not mistakable for punctuation marks of the normal kind. Rather, they mark what Gilles Deleuze calls "dividual" sets, sets themselves made up of smaller sets that nonetheless cannot be divided into other parts without qualitatively changing each time. This is not to be confused with the indivisible intensive originary space or *nam*: these sets *are* divided and re-articulated, and the difference or differentiation that breaks apart the unity of a singular moment—a moment for memory—is made thinkable, and those habits of thought through which one imagines a subject are revealed to be *disjunctive*.

Within the drama of the poem, a similar encounter between habit and memory as two modalities of time repeats, where the pedagogue O'Grady teaches by alienating his pupil from his habits of speech, and impressing new habits through rote repetition as a simple negation of previous habits: "say i \ say i." The pupil, however, recalls his mother's previous lessons of how to speak—or what to say—that contradict O'Grady's lesson. Read from left to right, the mother's lessons align with her memory of—and hatred for—the man "who break de heart of she \ husband hann," suggesting her husband had had similar encounters which themselves produced an interaction between habit and memory, and so on. The memory of the mother's lesson ("say *man* \ she is tell muh \ say *man*") posits a past instance as a dividual "cut" of time that has anticipated *this* present, the time of the poem, itself presented as another particular moment to be remembered (by the poem's speaker and, perhaps, by its reader) for some other event it now anticipates. Whereas the mother attempts a reverse discourse that would simply celebrate a certain difference for its own sake, the poem's structure suggests a more profound repetition. Rather than being overwhelmed by a world that

overpowers him (that of the husband) the self is instead excluded or broken down so that a new world or state of affairs may be brought about.

Cardinal temporal markers (e.g., temporal deictics, verb tenses, and so on) by which one might be able to tell the direction of time become ordinal markers through which discrete moments are distinguished, and counted, though their relationship is not fully determined. Time here is not strictly organized into a past which yields to a present which will produce a future from which both past and present-become-past can be recollected, but a fragmentation of linearity, a movement of and in time that makes moments echo each other: time as circle or arrow are both disrupted. The ● becomes the index of this disjuncture, but also a conduit of conjuncture. One notes the passage—"e di go \ e go di \ e go dead"—the last phrase resonant with the phrase "ego dead." This ego death (also a simple statement that someone has died) names the situation threatened by O'Grady's claiming for himself the absolute right to name objects and people, although he discovers that his possession is incomplete, that those names are simply the husk in whose wake one does not find the thing in itself, but the seed. The converging and diverging of time, then, does not organize itself around a particular subject, but around the empty form of memory as capacity invoked by *nam*.

The two tracks of the poem converge around a final scene of pedagogy ("say hit say hot say pot \ say rot ogrady says say rat") that ends with a threat ("i come \ ogrady says \ to strangle you maim \ in de grounn"), and a partial repetition of the opening of the poem, from the ● and opening conjunction through to the first "mudda" (*Ancestors* 90). Finally, O'Grady's source of power and control—naming—becomes the sign of his impotence. His pretense to power fails because of an ignorance of *nam*, of the limits of his own power:

e

nomminit

nomminit

nomminit

an

e

nomminit

nomminit

nomminit

but e nevva maim what me mudda me name

an e nevva nyam what me mane



(*Ancestors* 94)

After beginning again, there is a return to the mother's initial scene of pedagogy, the mother reveals the poem's speaker's *nam*: "dem is nomminit different an \ nan so mandingo she yessper you nam" (*Ancestors* 91). To name or "nomminit," a neologism that invokes both "nominate" and anagrammatic "mt (empty) minion," is here a limit-situation of the conception of time as straight line. The name "Mandingo" is itself polysemous, referring to a novel and film of that name (and thus to a certain African American history bound by stereotypes of the oversexed hyper-virile black male), and indirectly to the Mandinka people of western Africa and thus again to the figure of slavery, although nominally "redeemed" through the invocation of a once glorious past. While the mother provides an uplifting historical counter-balance to O'Grady's imperial condescension, she no more "gives" the *nam* than O'Grady destroys it. Both of them, through the name, indicate it without being able to claim it. The names O'Grady and the mother insist on, the names the poem's speaker learns, are not the real *nam*. The poem identifies an impulse to name, to protect or reject the

name, while simultaneously drawing out naming's limits through a formal presentation that fragments linear time to inaugurate a play of temporalities around an inexplicable secret whose meaning rests in its remaining "submerged."

The transition from circles to squares—the squaring of the circle—by the end of the poem marks an implicit call for action as much as the final lines, taken from Conrad Eugene Mauge, Jr.'s "Zombie Jamboree":

back to back belly to belly

uh doan give a damn

uh dun dead already

back to back

belly to belly

dun dung dead in de grounn ■

(*Ancestors* 95)

Those lyrics, putatively based on a lyric or "theme" by Goethe,¹³² commemorate Carnival. Wrenched from the context of the popular original song, the words are simultaneously defiant and resigned, caught between repetition and the bringing about of the new, which comes at the expense of the self in the present, raising as question the unknowable nature of survival, or living-on. It is in this sense that the poem invokes a third "synthesis" of time beyond habit and memory (both of which are invoked here), a repetition in which both the event and the actions themselves are left behind in favor of a future that shatters the self without reconstituting it in a higher form. This is not the end or "death" of "the *subject*" but of

¹³² On their 1959 recording of the song, on the album *Stereo Concert Plus!* The Kingston 3 claims the connection to Goethe, and that Lord Invader changed Goethe's theme from the "dance of the dead" to zombism to suit his experience.

"the subject" as an unsurpassable horizon of time. Simultaneously, and for the same reasons, it is not a "negation" or "transcendence" of the recorded history of the people or the region, but on the contrary a return to that history as if stripped of the sedimented associations and schemata of value in order to, as it were, "revitalize" it. Thus one can read Brathwaite's giving over of his poem to the language of another precisely such a shattering or surrender of the self, a look beyond the given world or words ("what kinds of new words are formable? become formidable?") to the question "What form(s) become possible?" This question emerges as the more general call for reformation, a "revitalization" that proceeds from the originary, not to be confused with an origin or the received images of the past. It shatters the direct link in the imagination between the past and the present in order to welcome the coming of the new.

"Tryin to Ghost Words to Holla This Tale"

The privileging of the new stands in tension with the news media's—and video's—memorializing function. Video, an iconic instance of modernity (and surveillance culture)—the “art form par excellence of late capital”—is a sign of transmission or imparting itself. Suspending arguments about video's implication in the privatization of experience and the supposed difficulties it institutes for imagining collective political mobilization, my interest lies in video's *iconic* status, and its relation to iconicity. Video makes possible a magnification of the everyday, memorializes the quotidian and the insignificant, and in the same gesture produces an anxiety that *this* time, *these* moments, will be erased, or lost from the more general flows of space-time or modernity. Contrary to the traditional memorializing functions of lyric or the plastic arts, video preserves sights and sounds indifferently, making each moment available as potential spectacle, potential landmark. Video forces us to

ask about the time of an event, the time of a little girl lost or the “time of the Haitian refugees” or the times of Haiti, for example, the time of life in death, the “haunted,” “cursed” place that is Haiti.

The two most direct literary equivalents for video in Brathwaite's writing are the journalistic chronicle, and the “DreamStories.” This latter, like SVS more generally, invokes another medieval writing practice: the dream vision, situating the traditions of the troubadour or griot alongside such works as Augustine’s *Soliloquia* or Dante’s *Divina Commedia*. As in the medieval dream visions, the DreamStories—which blend dreams, history, prophesy, current events, the private and the public—typically feature a narrator making a journey. Breaking with that earlier genre, however, the moment of falling asleep is suppressed, and the narrator of the DreamStories (identified with Brathwaite himself, linking the medieval dream vision to the modern dream work) typically does not have a guide through the dreamscape, making the journey itself directly the political or philosophical commentary. Better stated, the mediality of the presented tale becomes part of the tale.

These writings, often concerned with the everydayness of the everyday and closer to prose than verse, suggest a confrontation with potentiality itself, with what is objectively sick or “out of joint” in the world as given and the possibilities thinkable, in short with a situation requiring new metaphors. They create dilated or inflated instants that, as distinct from plural instances, suspend the division of time into discrete, autonomous events, creating a sense of days running together or materially repeating one another. The ultimate effect is one of the ceaseless passage of time simultaneous with its stasis: time replays as if on a loop. In these poems, time itself appears worn out; the links between the empty form of time and habit, which determines the direction of time, have frayed. There is thus a sense of moving merely from event from event, of repetition of the same event, linked only spatially through

occurring in the same place, which is not specific but any space. These events, too, arrive already shot through with meanings, already known, without the capacity to produce any new links; they heap atop one another with neither rhyme nor reason.

These writings also tend to thematize the circulation of tales through gossip (expressed by the refrain "say the Cattlewash boys" in "Noom"), interpolated newspaper articles, and transcripts from television news (e.g., especially "Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel" in *Ancestors* and the DreamStorie "Dream Haiti"). Such interpolations mark the imposition of an elsewhere that breaks up and re-inscribes the "here and now" of everyday actuality without acceding either to the grand scale of epic or to the direct representation of a speaker's thoughts and emotion from the vantage point of reflection. The news media metaphorize language's function as a medium that simultaneously conjoins addresser and addressee by first dividing them into those poles, with special emphasis on the interval of transmission. On the one hand, Brathwaite's poetry rejects a dyadic relationship between author and reader where the former imprints his/her experiences on the artwork that is then transparently transmitted to a reader as a new impression, immediately shared. On the other hand, it suggests a more robust sense of relation, drawing out the limits of the social order "as such" by gesturing toward the surplus drive or movement excluded in order to produce the artwork as merely a meaningful sign. Especially in the SVS poems, the fragmentary, figural, sub-signifying qualities of language—the presentation of letter on page—is allowed a relative autonomy, drawing together new possible assemblages and pathways of meaning or desire. This medial aspect of language is hinted at through the insistent marking of the poem as an intertextual field; authorship itself is made into an open question through the insistent recitation of the resources. The question of "the sources of a poet's life" returns and the poem becomes the product of the flow of daily life not as the bare recounting of the experiences that, taken together,

account for subjectivity, but of a more generalized flow. Mediality, as the image of a fragile sub-individual relation, refers to that *in* and *through* which data must pass, the interval of that passage, and the impossibility of a full or transparent use of language.

"Pixie," and its direct companion poem "The Heartbreak Hotel," added to the revision of *Mother Poem* in *Ancestors*, relates in the present tense the story of a young runaway named Stephanie/Pixie. The latter poem is "one long letter from Pixie iout here in the dark & transcribe by the poem from a real Bajan radio program of this name [Heartbreak Hotel] midnight nov 1997," presented prosaically, mostly in twenty-four-syllable lines. In "Heartbreak," the poem shifts between the represented speech of her mother crippled by stroke and her sister who cares for their mother, both as reported in Barbados newspapers, contrasting the immediacy of newspaper reportage to the supposed reflective time of the poet, time of generational time, or "murdered motherhood." The poem is not content to remain at the level of the sociological, imputing a photograph and other reconstituted images, interweaving lyrical excursus within a single long sentence (*fig. 7*), the two modes graphically separated by variable left margin:

300 yrs after the playment of this bitter poem in yr yard
 my baby sister Stephanie
 o shunted chile . o murdered motherhood
 her father flattered in his flight. stone crush. his eye
 lids like the evening of a dark moth wings. his holy
 fractured dead where no man sings

 stands maybe Pixie at her cripple mothers door

Figure 7, detail of "Pixie" (*Ancestors* 58-59)

In addition to mixing registers (e.g., the prosaic and the lyrical), this poem begins by also mixing pronouns (*my* sister, *her* mother, *your* yard), and timeframes both through

deictics on the one hand (both "300 years" and *this* moment where she stands), and orthography on the other (the old-fashioned murdered" and contemporary "chile"). The lyrical interlude comments on this single protracted act, a lingering at the threshold, which does not reach its conclusion until the twenty-eighth line ("but she's back safe home this one more morning time \ missing the musing mother"—). This conclusion is in turn followed by fifteen more lines of free indirect discourse conveying a sense of the mother's helplessness, which is then ironized by a printed outburst (*fig. 8*) apparently from another time, before or after Stephanie's return:



Figure 8, detail of "Pixie" (*Ancestors* 60)¹³³

Directly following this interlude, there is a separate box with a single, solid-line border, describing Stephanie in the first person ("in the black/white photo that i have she's all in white"), a description that becomes more interactive: "brown or black sandals i suppose (the \ picture don't forget is black&white)." This moment of interaction marks a general tendency of Brathwaite's later writing to address the reader directly and here helps to establish a thematic concern for memory, and the inherent perils of speaking for another: to speak *for* another is also to speak *as* another. The use of newspaper reportage as poetic medium here, too, extends the indeterminacy of address. The "I," for instance, is variably the mother, the sister Jennifer, Stephanie/Pixie, and the pluralized authorial voice of the poem (which blends with

¹³³ The corresponding asterisk on page 65 credits "Natasha Adams, *Weekend Investigator* (Btown Barbados) 29 Aug 97)" adding that "*This and (3) below = verbatim adaptations from the poem.*" There is slight ambiguity regarding this citation, as there is no third section. Thus, despite the attribution, the source, if any, for this outburst remains unclear, especially since no article title is listed. At any rate, the documentary or journalistic form seems to be most pertinent, and the attribution itself creates the effect of research.

two other named authors credited with authoring the "original" news stories). The language of the poem qua poem must pass through this field of indetermination, upholding a fiction of intertext that has Karia Dear write under the headline "Missing teenager book in arms \ of mother," the kind of parapraxis (slips of the tongue) that proliferates throughout SVS writing, a figure of what is lost in video's archivization. This poem ends with the repetition "promises \ promises \ promises," which follows the display of another plea from an indeterminate time (*fig. 9*), presumably from Pixie's mother, this time without border:

***I need help. Please! I really need
someone to help me and my chil-
dren***

Figure 9, detail of "Pixie" (Ancestors 67)

"Heartbreak Hotel" takes up the same call for help, this time from the apparent point of view of Pixie, who wants "somebody to care & to direct my life & tell me \ what to do." That transcript (putatively of a radio broadcast) ends when "she sign the letter w/ her name," and gives way to a second or third "voice" of the poem (depending whether the hand that tells of the transcription is taken to be identical with what follows), written in a different font. The poem thus draws attention to the various discursive registers through which the text passes, has already passed on the way to transcription and to producing poetry as a call to poetry. The lines at the end of the poem adopt a similar tone to those lyrical lines that dilate the moment of Pixie standing at the threshold of her mother's house. Here they bemoan "the lives so broken \ w/ inglorious \ sounds o broken & incongruous \ woods" crying out against "words so shoved about so worn & coil we cannot slip \ yr sandals on and wear them comfortable out into the \ bleeding streets of chance." Language becomes a

specifically bodily extension. The poem ends (*fig. 10*) with an allusive question, rendered in nation language, which introduces a similar point of incongruity that suspends the poem:

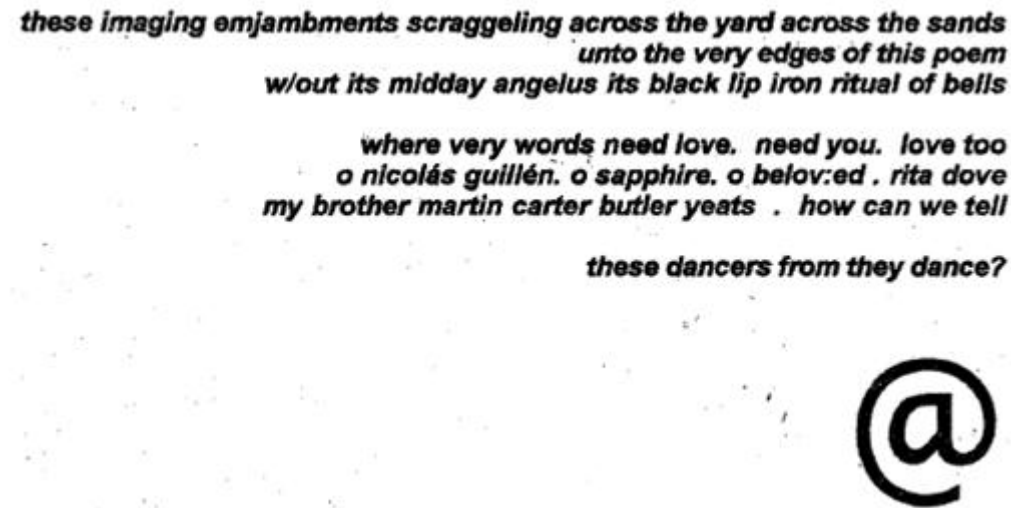


Figure 10, detail of "Heartbreak Hotel" (*Ancestors* 72)

There is a directly self-referential moment—"the edges of this poem"—which becomes the metaphorical desert or littoral space ("sands") upon which the words progress. Through the invocation of a "midday angelus" and the recitation of the names of poets and texts, a ritual function is ascribed to poetry, ultimately related to a devotional of the renewable words of which poetry is made. Finally, the links between embodiment and its "inscriptions" through movements such as the dance get effaced when all graphicity is subsumed under the notion of the representation of speech is called into question. It is not enough to assign to language or writing an exclusive instrumental task of *conveying* meaning, a notion through which the word is through exhausted by its function. The emphasis on language as medium, through invocation of other media and through parapraxis, highlights the ineluctable failed transmission, those codes or signs that cannot be transmitted "as such" that are the possibilities of renewing the word. Through analogizing the task of the poet to that of the dancer, indistinguishable from his or her work, Brathwaite offers the means to

change the units of analysis to other units of sense-making, including those moments, such as the paralinguistic "at" sign, paradigmatic symbol of a world "connected" by information technology.

"Dream Haiti" turns on similar moments of indistinction, and similarly fraught "connections." Its journey begins at sea "where the US Coast Guard cutter was patrolling / along the borders of the Mexicans & my brothers – / the what was called 'the Haitian Refugees'" (*DS* 95). In the subsequent version (*fig* 11),¹³⁴ subtitled "in a strange land," this beginning reads:

the blow & wet metal sides of my nerve
 where the US Naval Coast Guard cutter was patrol in
 all along the borders of the Mexicans & my brothers –
 in what was call in the dream . the time of the



Figure 11, detail of "DreamHaiti"

In both instances, brotherhood is emphasized alongside the intervention of the U.S. Coast Guard (which becomes typographically important later), but the addition of "in the dream" adds an additional layer of mediation to "what was call(ed)," and a further refusal of the name "Haitian Refugees." Further, both instances follow this identification with the immediate question rendered (*figs* 12 and 13):

//// I write Shante Chackmul & ask
 WHAT NAME BAHAMAS GIVE TO
 HAITIANS WHO COME TO YR OUSE
 TO BEG WRUK ////

Figure 12, detail of "DreamHaiti"

¹³⁴ *DS(2) dreamstories* (New York: New Directions Books, 2007), 159. Hereafter cited as *DS2*.

//// mi write
Shanté Chacmoul
 - **WHAT NAME BAHAMAS GIVE HAITIES WHO COME ADOBE**
 BEG WOROK ////

Figure 13, detail of "DreamHaiti"

(DS 95/DS2 160)

This question, which the narrator proposes to write to Shante Chakmul/Shanté Chacmoul is set off by four unpronounceable forward slashes, ////, an intrusion of the frame of the tale into the tale, simultaneously setting the question apart *and* aside in advance. Along with the use of nation language, these slashes create a ‘tense continuum’: “I write” or “mi write” could equally mean “I write” or am writing, “I will write” or “I wrote”. The unknown times of his future/past writing with similarly overlapping time within the narrative create an "ontology of dream," wherein one moment affects and has been affected by other moments, including ghosts or versions of itself. This "ontology" is rooted in the materiality of video itself, whose frames are not single or discrete as in film, but mutually constituted or interlaced. Each video "frame," a catachrestic term, is not its own, but contains and is contained by part of the frame before and after, which in part accounts for glitches during playback, and makes video editing difficult. One cannot get to a singular instance – time, instead, is differential, moving from A to A' rather than A to B. In Brathwaite's hands, this becomes a technique for making “visible” anew that which exceeds the frames through which the given world is given by insisting on the interrelation between things and times. Here, the tense continuum sets adrift a dynamic shard of time from and within the general flow of narrative time.

In DS(2), the words “Haitian Refugees,” distorted, presented in outlines with a heavy drop shadow, are nearly illegible, suggesting yet a further refusal or deferral of

the name, the exchange of one sense of icon—an emblem of suffering or Western imperialism going back to the Revolution—for another. The illegible letters echo the epigraph, apostrophizing Haiti: “one day we turn our head \ and look inside you.” This “look inside” is not simply a look of recognition or identity, but identification—an instance of critical naming. The iconicity of the letters themselves, of the very word, suggests that we have not looked, or that “Haitian Refugees” mark that which we cannot or, due to the distortions of our apparatuses and norms of perception, of production and reproduction, of narrative emplotment, can no longer “read.” The “Haitian Refugees” are illegible but we nonetheless must attempt to read them, find some way to meet or acknowledge *in this time*, which is not known or given in advance. The category—the words—is “renewed”; the refugees again become Arrivants, unknown in their singularity. This “look inside” does not refer to a redeemed version of the past, but an affirmation of that past, and this present. In light of the specification of the “*Time* of the ‘Haitian Refugees’” in the newer version, we are invited to ask, and implicated in the question, what *are* the times of the Haitian Refugees? What, in the aftermath of the earthquake of 2010, are the times of the dead?

Formally, these blended times generate a “plural instant.” Through such devices as repetition, and shifts of narrative perspective—from first-person singular to first-person plural acknowledging many dead (the twenty-five on board the boat built to carry only “13 or 14 or 15” and the “many more thousands gone” of the dedication), time doubles back on itself like the movement of a wave which is also the movement of reading (“as if I was already turning the leaves of the \ waves”). The journey itself, at sea for an unspecified period, re-inscribes both “Cristophe on La Ferrière walking that sloe corridor of water” and “Toussaint Legba all the way out on Napoleons joyless eyeless island of \ torture on the glacial seas of the Jura,” linking them both to

“the dungeons of guinée & gorée”: infamous sites in west Africa visited by tourists drawn to the iconic holding spaces of the Middle Passage. “Dream Haiti” insists on the implication of the spectator with the spectacle, both through techniques of self-reference (the repeated “as I say” or “as you can see”) and in the form of a capacious first-person that links the author with the so-called “Haitian Refugees,” even onto the point of death: “& there was so much goin on all above us \ what w/the ferrymen shoutin for survivors tho we was all quite dead & \ bloated by this time” (*DS2* 189).

The deictic “this time” becomes another suspended moment, one located as much in the preventable future as in the preventable past. It is at this moment that the narrative shifts the time to an unnarrativizable time: that of one's own death, a moment that, as the annihilation of any possible subjectivity cannot properly be called traumatic but might be thought to mark the “possibility of establishing certain synchronisms, American, recurrent timeless / relating this to that, yesterday to toda / (y)” (*MR/I* 77). The figure of prosopopeia, giving voice (or literal face) to one absent or dead, here also marks a renewal, an opening onto a frame of a more fundamental universality: that of desire as a mode of striving to persist in one's own being. Beyond memorializing or speaking for those who cannot, invoking Marx, represent themselves, beyond attempting to give “authentic voice” to the experiences or suffering of others, prosopopeia draws attention to an absent or broken link, aided by SVS which centers the announcement along the vertical but not horizontal axis, smaller in size than the “cul-de-sac” that describes the movement of the waves, another figure of restrained or proscribed movement: “‘endless purgatorial passages’ – if you can call it that –” (*DS2* 192).

The shift of point of view at the end of “Dream Haiti” opens onto another question of naming (*fig.* 14), of permission to name or rename:

while we stann on the soff hand deck of the
 Coast Guard
impeccable
 watchin them poem

Figure 14, detail of "DreamHaiti"

"Them" here apparently refers to the drowned Haitians, making "poem" their activity. At the same time, the syntactic unit could be "them poem," those poems, such that the dead themselves become poems, poetry, the work of the poets that they are: "we was all artists & strangers to each / other & not soldiers or sailors or dwarfs as i have to / go on insistin" (DS2 175). The word "impeccable," repeats throughout "Dream Haiti" referring to the movement of the sea ("the sea was also movin impeccable" and "the impeccable surge & breathe of the seas out there"), and by implication the death of a "likkle bwoy" you have seen on tv: "juss this glimpse juss this shot dripping w/history – \ clear out the water *for all our howls to see*" (DS2 161 177, 193, emphasis in original). This child, like the narrator to whom he is linked by the name "likkle bwoy," is singled out from the dead, responsibility resting upon a failure to recognize that "we are they broders & fellow writers bound to them by all \ kinds of travelers cheques & the content of our character" (DS2 197). The invocation of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech serves as a caution about the responsibility of dreaming, and the impossibility of any dream being fulfilled *in its time*, a caution to pause and ask *which* dream is to be fulfilled.

The boy's passage is doubled by an implied televisual display that prompts a sustained address to the reader (*figs.* 15-18):

and all the world waits the world watches as i drop him back
 down w/the splash

Figure 15, detail of "DreamHaiti"

- let me say it -
 that e nvr deserve
 ^
back into the water
that e nvr deserve that e nvr nvr nvr
deserve
 that e nvr deserve
 ^

Figure 16, detail of "DreamHaiti"

& yu chide me fe
chantin like
this? fe lament
=ing this seem
=ing perpetu
=al pogrom & pro
=gram like this?
this
season on
season persist

Figure 17, detail of "DreamHaiti"

=uant anomie?
for tryin to ghost
words to
holla
this tale?

1234567890

Figure 18, detail of "DreamHaiti"

(DS2 193-196)

I read this “tryin to ghost words” as a direct invocation of video’s differentiation of time as relates to poetics. The attempt to make the words ‘live off the page’ (which in the case of the line “that e nvr deserve that e nvr nvr nvr \ deserve” renders them illegible) is accomplished by deferring their sense to some future time. Only those elements considered secondary to meaning—sound, rhythm, the form on the page, the iconicity of the letters—remain. Rhetorically, this direct address to the reader, from a right-justified textual margin, punctures and punctuates the narrative unfolding, making the inadequacy of mere reference palpable at a moment where it most seems necessary. We are reminded, in other words, that one speaks only of the ones called ‘the Haitian Refugees,’ and that such reference is overdetermined by other discourses, an ongoing ‘perpetual pogrom’ that informs their existence “as such.” A third difference, the editorial or authorial I responding to a critic, cuts the shifts between first-person singular and plural, and the valences of that plural perspective, linking the narrator now with the Haitian refugees, now with the Coast Guard. Enjambling lines by separating the gerund endings, and using the equal sign rather than the conventional hyphen (which, in any case, is not on the standard side of the break) further the point, marking the *ongoing* nature of this scene, its repetition throughout history, throughout the Times of Haiti. The referenced chant itself, punctuated again by an unpronounceable symbol that recurs throughout “Dream Haiti,” inscribes this telling within an aspirant community much as the invocation of television does, insisting on the distance of the call over and against the proximity of longed-for response.

Neither outburst nor symbols appear in the previous version(s) of “Dream Haiti,” however, which highlights another important feature of SVS as related to video: unlike film, video can be directly erased and reinscribed. If film’s relationship to the profilmic object or event is, as has been frequently argued, fundamentally

indexical, implying always a relationship with *something* that has appeared before the lens, the video of Sycorax Video Style is primarily iconic. It draws our attention to that for which we do not yet have concepts or corresponding ideas and thus to what did *not* and *could not* appear. We are reminded of the impermanence of our concepts despite appearances, and of our capacity to revise or overwrite them. In this sense, impeccable sea and implicitly impeccable “likkle bwoy” are literally without sin—without a relation with the world except, as we will see, as a mode of the world—and become iconic in two senses. On the one hand, they are solid images that hold a place in devotional practices, but on the other hand they are signs for which a relation must be (re-)imagined, restored, or created.

This story in particular, and the DreamStories more generally demand attention to the liminal spaces and crossed boundaries—between life and death, between nations in the ambiguous terrain of international water and after the would-be refugees land, between a praise song and a gesture that comes too late, between would-be saviour and would-be saved. However, “Dream Haiti” makes a deeper ontological claim through one of its moments of apparent parapraxis, linking the hands that grasp and the ropes and lifebuoys themselves. “[T]he railings / or stations & stanchions [...] was like mode of the same material or metal as our / fingers & the palms of our hands” and “we were trying to reach the lifelines that were made of the same material as / the thongs of our fingers & the webs of our skin” (DS2 185, 189).

The slippage between “mode” and “made” is no mere solecism but points to the “ontology of dream,” the permeability and changeability of identities within the dream, and a common *substance* within the dream's theater, in distinction from a *logic* or *logos* of the dream. To say the railings were “mode of the same material” suggests, that is, a single underlying substance, and suggests a possibility within the “sandscape” of the dream space of re-imagining connections between people and objects in the

waking world by dissolving the frames through which objects are apprehended or ordered, including the singular ego as the locus of possible experience. Thus, “transliminalness” gestures toward a sense of inter-individuation, of differentiation rooted in a common substance suspending the atomistic division in order to think of community or Relation not on the basis of the recognition of common traits from individual to individual but despite there being no adequate frame through which such community as a political project might be thought. We imagine community because of—not despite—difference, as the product of a common striving. There is neither a singular experience nor transcendental truth to the deaths at sea in the Middle Passage that brought the Africans to the New World, nor to the ongoing deaths and dislocations of Haitian and other refugees. There is only a common striving to survive, to live on, and a common demand that the Arrivants, whoever they are, be welcomed as guests on whatever shores upon which they land. Through SVS and its motivation of icons rather than symbols, Brathwaite's *DreamStorie* offers one means through which such welcome might be thought, or sounded: we stand, watching them poem, watching them make, and we make, with them, something new.

"So Hopefully New Each Time-Beginning Poem"

Many of the works previously considered move from the everyday to articulate connections and misconnections between that time and global time. Their counterparts are those poems that start with the Event or global rupture that marks a transition point between epochs and whose resonances spread throughout the world, often known only by a date as in one of Brathwaite's early poems, "Caliban":

It was December second, nineteen fifty-six.

It was the first of August eighteen thirty-eight.

It was the twelfth of October fourteen ninety-two.

How many bangs how many revolutions?

(*The Arrivants* 192)

One is tempted to read these lines as the contraction of world-historical events into singular points related to the development of a particular space (the Caribbean), organizing time along a reverse trajectory whose line extends from Castro back to Columbus¹³⁵ (and in *X/Self* will ultimately extend to Rome through the motif "Rome burns \ and our slavery begins"). Indeed, these lines read as if they seek some original moment or explanation, for the state of the world from the beginning to the end of history, the two ends made to meet at that vanishing point. However, this litany of dates follows an account of what was in the newspapers at an indeterminate moment that may have been the morning of Castro's revolution, and an account of the weather at what may be yet another time: "The sky was cloudy, a strong breeze; \ maximum temperature eighty-two degrees." Taken together, these dates and data are reduced to a single plane, to instances of analepsis or "flashback" within the unfolding historical narrative of the Caribbean, looking from an indeterminate moment that grammatically must follow these events to an overdetermined past. This is another example of the plural instant, achieved by tense. The instant is stretched to maximum elasticity; world historical events have become only so many recited moments, worn out by repetition, retaining only their own monumentality, which serves as the sign of explanation through the circulation of these dates as so many clichés.

There remains a more profound movement in these lines, beyond the immediate definitions of these dates, which draw their importance from a discourse of history that precedes them, proceeding in reverse as if seeking the phantasmatic

¹³⁵ Of course, Trinidadian historian and statesman Eric Williams unapologetically—and magnificently—traces that line in his grand *From Columbus to Castro: The History of the Caribbean 1492-1969* (New York: Vintage, 1984).

moment of origin. Though there is a continuum of tense that, in the absence of deictics, places them grammatically on a single temporal plane, organized under the sign of History, each of the moments themselves inscribes a discrete plane of time. In the place of a particular recollection or memory belonging to a person or a people, the poem presents a world-memory, time as always already "there." In this way, a depth of time is returned to these Events as a both plurality and density, as an anticipation of recollection when the actual will be broken up and reconstituted *as* recollection. The newspaper printed on any-day-whatever, the weather of some unknown time or place, again, are on the same grammatical plane as those other dates, returning to the latter their virtual—that is, unactualized—capacity, the still unfulfilled potential of those days *and* the historical events by which they come to be defined. In this sense, time is revealed within the Event itself, apart from its punctual arrival. The indiscernibility of times, the indiscernible relationship between those events and some particular present suspends the poem at a consideration of time itself, its movement and division into a past and a future, the operation by which time makes the present pass and preserves the past within itself. The past, the empty form of "it was," can no longer be confused with the mental existence of memories through which it is actualized in individuals or peoples; for the same reason, it can no longer be confused with the archives or narratives through which it is actualized. The structural emptiness of the past becomes the basis on which "bangs and revolutions" can happen, not strictly modeled on the revolutions and cataclysms of the past.

Ark, one of Brathwaite's most recent poems, takes a specific world-historical event (the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States on September, 11 2001) as its point of departure. Like "Caliban," it pursues the plural instant to the point that time breaks with localizable connection, producing a continuity of duration defined by interacting planes of time rather than the ready-made

links of historical narrative. As with many of the SVS poems, this one has been printed twice: first in *Born to Slow Horses* under the title "Hawk" and then again in revised form as a stand-alone volume re-titled *Ark: A 9/11 Continuation Poem*. Both versions begin with initial text whose function as subtitle or invocation is unclear: "Hawk's Last Body _Soul Ronnie Scott's in London 11 Sept 1967 _ Counting," the underscore taking the place of the ampersand, graphically suggesting a "submerged" linkage if not unity.¹³⁶ "Body and Soul," among other things, refers to the jazz standard composed by Johnny Green, Frank Eyton, Edward Heyman, and Robert Sour, which Coleman Hawkins, nicknamed Hawk, famously recorded with his orchestra in 1939, almost exactly twenty-eight (or twenty-seven) years prior to the date of this supposed last performance with a different ensemble on a different continent. Pertinent to my present consideration of, Hawkins recorded a famous two-chorus solo, since preserved by the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress.

From the outset, the poem brings into contiguity several disparate times: the famous recording of "Body and Soul" from 1939, a concert from 1967 or 1968, and the terrorist attacks that have (so far) lead to two U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with their untold thousands. But apart from gesturing toward those other times, the uniqueness of each uncouneted, subsequent death—from Hawkins' to those who died in the attacks or would later die in the wars (the poem adds other sites and "air beyond what we call age")—the poem insists on the correspondence between these two moments which are made to reflect each other. It is therefore not accidental that one encounters in the initial lines "Hawk \ shrouded in mirrors. showers. haunted by twins," a direct reference to the reduplicated moment—the date September 11—

¹³⁶ *Ark: A 9/11 Continuation Poem* (New York: Savacou North 2004) changes the year from 1967 to 1968. Hereafter cited as *Ark*.

being brought together to a point that again risks indiscernibility, such that one becomes (*fig. 19*) actual and the other virtual:

but some day certain in the future of New
York. his magic enigmatic majesty now flow-
ering the room . his body glow-

ing the only word we have for what is now this glow-
ering around these future towers of his solo masterpiece
rising himself again in sound towards the silver cross

of an approaching jet. dissecting in the blue

Figure 19, detail of *Ark*

(*Ark 9*)

The attacks in Manhattan and Washington, D.C. become the dream or nightmare already inscribed in Hawkins' performance, his signature song literalizing in "the body body body bod- \ ies pour- \ ing from this dark Manhattan strom- \ boli into dim catacombs of dis-" (*Ark 9*). One is confronted at once with a recorded moment (the world-historical event) inscribed dimly in a previous recorded moment (the 1968 performance, inscribed in memory as a recollection-image) which refers back to an earlier moment (the 1939 recording) and so on. These lines generalize the process of inscription itself, invoking graphics not linked exclusively to speech, but also to sound more generally, to light, to the airplane that inscribes an iconic cross, all of which are brought together by the coalescence of these moments into one moment. A "force, a flow of power, an impetus that carries with it word, image, and consciousness" without belonging to any of those, which is always overflows transects that moment, which I will too quickly term improvisation.¹³⁷

¹³⁷ Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" *Roots* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 70.

Brathwaite identifies jazz, specifically its privileging of improvisation, as a music "expressive... of the problems of the whole civilized complex of living in the post-Faustian, post-Freudian world" is no longer valued not for its expressive capacity as a reflection of protest or resilience. Instead, it becomes that which transects the discontinuous time of Coleman Hawkins' performance and the attacks in New York and Washington D.C. where the former grammatically predicts the latter, and those discrete inscriptions of the past related to one another only from the point of view of a passing present to which they exist linearly as former presents. Like the command to sing in *Shar*, improvisation reintroduces a vigorous conception of freedom, an opening to the future. *Ark* includes the transcript of a woman who lost her firefighter husband, a plea ("so let me \ my beloved \ love you love you love you love you") and reiteration of the scene of the performance of "Body and Soul," now labeled a cadenza (an unaccompanied flourish of indefinite form typically given to a solo musician at the close of a movement or transition between movements) that sees "the volution of HAWK into HARK (vibration of sound into song) into ARK." The poem concludes with a prayer for deliverance, the revelation of the poem as a psalm, ending with a call to "think think think of the space & peace of tomorrow" (*Ark* 42).

This improvisation supplements "the blues of these ragged font edges and the call&response dread contralto tenorsax delivery" by adding an implicit question regarding the shaping of time, the orientation toward an uncertain future. Improvisation is not identical with "freedom"; indeed, its freedom is only a relative freedom. Its value comes from its residing "in the moment," a present haunted by both past and future, whose outcome is not known in advance, and whose direction is not fully pre-determined by either past experiences or training, and so on. If the poem dramatizes "time out of joint," temporality as itself in crisis—literally divided—improvisation becomes a force of vitality, the breaking through of the future insofar as

it offers the thought of an utterance or inscription not yet made. Hence the pun "the axe + àxé saxophone" early on in the poem.¹³⁸ Through the alignment of improvisation with unbound potential capable of illuminating new possibilities, it emerges as a new kind of sign through which the fissures and saturations of the moment can be thought apart from the ideology of "immediate" perception. Improvisation necessarily entails anticipation, but it need not be the anticipation of this or that particular event, but unpredicated anticipation—'time in its pure state.'

Improvisation is a non-exclusive sign of genesis, a function shared in other poems by the lwa or deities of African and Diasporic religion (e.g., Oya, Xangô, Legba, Ananse, and so on) and the notion of *nam* itself. In his poetics, Brathwaite is a stunning thinker of time, its asymmetries and internal differentiation, its multi-directionality. But he is also a profound thinker of the future as what breaks through, what arrives and has not been predicted. Fully aware of the sway of tradition(s) and the vexed political questions of our times, he nonetheless never stops inscribing in his work figures or signs of the genetic, opposing the merely new, crafting "words to refashion futures," to reawaken or revitalize the unactualized potential in letters left for dead.

¹³⁸ For more on the concept of àxé please see Carol Boyce Davies' article "Ashé" in *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origins, Experiences, and Culture* vol. 1, ed. Carol Boyce Davies (Oxford (UK): ABC-CLIO, 2008), 119. She writes "As a cultural definition, then, àxé moves across two large discursive fields: that of spirituality, and that of creativity, with its meanings and associations of what it is to be human in the world, questions of existence, the power to be, dynamic force in all things."

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CONCLUSION

POSTSCRIPT: AFTER THE END

To end by returning to the beginning: two prepositional phrases *after the end* and *of the world*. This end, the world, cannot be thought in themselves, cannot be thought immediately. Too quickly, the question becomes one of life, of the living or, simply, living. What living or survival—what being—is invoked in this phrase, which has dogged the readings and the literature of this study, where time and again certainties break down, the categories of thinking called into question to suggest we have not yet begun to think. *Don't you know that yet?* What kind of address is this, transmitted by whom to whom; the situation is possible without accepting that the proposition—(it is) after the end of the world—and the implicit challenge to go on. What speech, what writing can go on, and toward what future?

My questions here, which I ask directly for the first time, come after the end—not of the world, but of a writing, and I mean by them to suggest not the end of life but of forms of life. Repeating an earlier point, it is not necessarily the end of the *world* but of *the* world, and thus a challenge to conceive the world differently. Here, I begin from the impossible situation of writing about my own writing and the possibilities of writing, and the responsibilities of reading, so far only touching upon the questions of literature that concern my dissertation. This present writing, after the end, has as *its* end defending a piece of writing that is in its turn a *defense* of literature—a vindication, writing in favor or in praise of literature, and an effort to work from that which is specific to literature. Experimental writing, exemplified by Sun Ra's paradoxical phrase, is similarly a demand to think the end, and to think beyond the end but retaining it, needing to mark oneself temporally vis-à-vis this break or rupture.

Methodologically, my attention to the specificity of writing—its progress from sentence to sentence, say, or occasionally from word to word—often meant putting aside or deferring questions of literature's “ends,” especially its supposed political ends. How do we think literature after those ends—often sought in the symbolic value of the signatory or themes, its reference to “external” political concerns or its marshaling of specific references—are suspended, deferred by literature's means, its mode of assembling or producing: its poetics? The debates between “mere” formalism and “committed” political readings, I have tried to demonstrate, turn on a similar moment of non-thought, an artificial delimiting of what is “proper” to literature, and to literary analysis. A “pure” formalism that cannot consider the historical conditions of emergence for genres and literary conventions, which often involve colonial or pseudo-colonial encounters is no more or less valid than a “pure” political reading that considers a certain account of history or the political as the transcendent horizon of meaning and value. The two must be thought in their mutual relation and estrangement, which entails an understanding of poetics as *improper*, as that through which literature's effects always “slide away from the proposed” in Amiri Baraka's phrase.

Let me address this point more concretely with a pair of questions: does literature end, that is to say, is there no writing *after its end* such that we might conclude all reading and all writing with the phrase “The End”? Similarly, where would we locate that end? Would it be in the final propitious moment of the fulfillment of the transcendent Word or Book? That is, wouldn't it have to be the case that once whatever political concern to which literature was supposed to respond had been resolved, would the literary text simply become a mere historical curiosity, the task of writing exhausted so that now we could get on to the “real business” of living? Let me risk a third question that insists here: without literature, without writing, how

can we live? What life is there without writing? This question, finally motivates my concerns throughout this project for thinking literature processually, as open-ended and inexhaustible. I do not yet ask the question of how to live, but instead ask of the necessity of writing, of thinking, to life, and the ways in which literature overflows or exceeds itself and the narrowly construed questions one may pose to it. My way of reading seeks to find those moments where *logos* hesitates, where meaning can only be assigned if one makes an active decision, that is to say stops reading, that is to say commits a certain violence to the text, which one must do to read at all. There is, there can be, no absolutely non-violent reading of a text, no absolutely faithful or perspicuous interpretation. What I move to is not literature's "ownmost being" or relation to Dasein. The need to address literature "as such" only through examples of literature and the literary, quite apart from the politics of that selection, suggest the difficulty of describing what is most *properly* literary. My interest, at any rate, lies in literature's fundamental *impropriety*, its non-self-possession, typically glossed throughout my analyses as moments of ecstasy or fugitive articulacy rooted in a process of writing, which inevitably draws on what I term the μ topic. This in turn becomes a way for thematizing literature's "living on" after the end.

Throughout, I remain interested in literature's relationship to politics. Though I would defer the question of literature's relationship to, say, the relations of production or the mechanisms through which certain texts, authors or subjects come to be freighted with "cultural capital, my interest in writing by racialized figures, especially of the African diaspora, keeps those concerns nearby. As does my interest in experimental writing, which names as much moments within texts as much as modes of writing, and as such risks falling into the same void Barthes does, for example, in his definition of the text. At this stage of my thinking, I thought it was important to anchor the discussion in the history of the discipline of African American

studies and literary studies, and a certain history of thinking about black writing in America, broadly conceived. I do not argue, as the discipline has often required, that there is a fundamental or absolute distinction between black writing and other writings, or an absolutely or rigorously insular network of authorship and readership on the old model of "for us, by us." In part this is historical and material: the word "black" does not uniformly signify *one* people or invoke *one* experience, if it ever did, at the turn of the twenty-first century in America. Through the term "black," hope to keep open the heterogeneity of that writing and the experiences it is often taken to "express" or "represent."

My polemic against representation as a mode of reading that takes racialization as some sort of "primal scene" (often assuming as its tacit counterpart some ideal non-racial existence) marks an effort to distance myself from such thinking, to move beyond what has not—and perhaps could not be—thought in the formation of the discipline as discipline. I find in Du Bois an early figure who *did* think carefully about the heterogeneous experiences of black people and "the darker peoples of the world," who never stopped insisting on differences between the peoples and experiences black people in the United States, the Caribbean and Africa. More specifically, in narrating his supposed moment of racialization—which has always already happened before the narration and, as I argue, before the supposed instance of the Event—Du Bois puts the question of correspondence before me, which resounds throughout the texts of the other authors explicitly in epistolary form and implicitly in stray or "foreign" bits of text. Through such attention, I try to keep open the specificity—and the strangeness—of literature itself, what one might say is its self-differentiation from its imputed "ends." As one of its furthest ambitions, the dissertation endeavors to rethink the places and mechanisms of politics within literary texts by beginning from the

specificity of the literary work, holding in abeyance the political conditions under which literature becomes literature, or comes to be valorized under that name.

Without wanting to attach a necessary “emancipatory” or politically progressive power to literature's production alienating effects, I do claim for literatures prowess at extending complexities, with or without respect to the author's will (indeed often against the author's will) something of the power of thinking. All of these reflections lead to the question of the experience of—rather than expressed in or reflected by—the literary text. This almost immediately opens onto notions involving the specificity of the literary object, the specificity of the instant, the time of reading, and the time of thinking, that is, the *times* of thinking, of what in thinking can awaits animation in some other time as in the expression “an idea whose time has come.” Methodologically, then, there is no reading that is not a re-reading, a re-tracing of the literary text to discover those places where it either undoes itself, or undoes its categories.

In turn, re-introducing time into consideration as one of literature's media, the notion of the literary text as a bound, strictly delimited object, exhaustively knowable in all rigor, ends up being called into question. I have no interest in upholding an ontology of *the* literary text as *this* configuration of sentences, words, or concepts. The attention to the literary object, that is to say, reveals that there is not *one*. This is to say that reading multiplies it; cast out, it does not return to itself as itself, it does not maintain itself, is not perfectly stable. It is not a question here of reading “completing” literature, or of its adding a temporal element: time is not a supplement that undoes the solid literary object, but is internal to it as the risk of its self-undoing and the chance of its self-transcendence.

Let me say a concluding word about the authors here, and about the category of the experimental. I have touched on Du Bois, whose notion of beauty becomes

important to the extent that I read it as gesturing towards a horizon of time not fully held within extant norms or understandings of Truth and Right or Justice, touched on by the artwork and the community it inscribes. The poetry of Nathaniel Mackey—individual poems, the ongoing series *Song of the Andoumboulou* and the related *From A Broken Perfume Bottle Traces Still Emanate*—offer a tremendous resource for thinking of a transnational moment prior to the formation of nation that persists and insists within national formations, while also producing a poetics that remains attentive to language. Suzan-Lori Parks, in a similar vein, makes the use of language into a theme, while in my reading she also problematizes thematic readings rooted in reference, in part by showing the ubiquity of referentiality within any use of language. With Kamau Brathwaite, finally, I find an occasion to reflect on the media of literature more generally, especially its graphic presentation. In all cases, these authors pay attention to the circulation of texts, ideas, and bodies, and each can be read as offering a defense of literature, a vindication and celebration.